Defining Healthy Systems

Health means whole.

Health according to Webster, means "well-being; flourishing condition." It comes from the root "hal" meaning whole. If we define a system as a "whole" how is that different from our meaning of health as "wholeness?" How do we distinguish a healthy system from an unhealthy one? What are the characteristics of health that, when developed in organizations, give us leverage to their vitality and optimum functioning? How do we create a "flourishing condition" in an organization? Are the measures we use to describe and monitor success the right ones for tracking organization health? Many of these questions will fuel subsequent articles. Here we hope to define some terms and present the principles of holistic health as a model for understanding organizations that may include but go beyond some of our traditional measures for organization success.

Holistic medicine describes health as the experience of wholeness as integration and flow. The parts are organized, integrated and there is a flow or connectivity between them such that they function as one. Awareness across the system, throughout the organism or organization, enhances its ability to act in alignment. In an organization, vision, alignment, coordinated programs, and linked processes create the vital structures for integration and flow that establish and sustain organization health.

An organization is a system or whole.

Webster defines *system* as "a regularly interacting or interdependent group forming a unified *whole*; an organization forming a network especially for distributing something or serving a common purpose." The following characteristics of dynamic systems are described in the field of systems thinking.

1. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts; and all the parts are interconnected and interdependent.
2. A system's structure determines its function; its behavior reflects its structure.
3. Systems are self-regulating, seek stability, and resist change; patterns in systems persevere.
4. Leverage points exist in a system that yield deeper change but are often not obvious or easy to find; when found the direction to push them may not seem logical.

5. Changes in one part of a system will have unintended consequences in other remote parts of the system and after considerable time delays.
6. Changes that last will create conditions that are worse before they are better.
7. Problems and solutions lie within the system; a solution to one problem may create other problems.
8. There are limits to change and growth for every system; each has cycles of growth, maintenance, and decay.

Healthy organizations demonstrate total wellbeing

Since we have defined both health and system in terms of "wholeness," what do we mean by a healthy system? By our own definitions isn't this redundant? How do we distinguish between a healthy system and an unhealthy one? We consider an organization "a living system." That implies dynamism, vitality, growth, learning, and the capacity to live from a state of total well-being. . A healthy system has vitality that arises and increases according to the degree of *flow* and *integration* among its parts and as a result of its capacity to *focus* its energies on the levers that determine that vitality.

Language Section:

- Health means whole.
- Organization is a system WHICH MEANS WHOLE ALSO
- Since these mean essentially the same thing, how do we distinguish? What is a healthy organization - vitality born of free (degree of) flow and integration and focus (in and out)

HEALTHY SYSTEM—FOUR ASPECTS OF HEALTH TO BE APPLIED TO ORGANIZATIONS

1. **FLOW**
2. **VITALITY**
3. **FOCUS**
4. **INTEGRATION**

All organizations and businesses are living systems that behave in somewhat predictable, persistent ways. (Systems thinking and holistic health)

Webster defines *organization* as "an administrative and functional structure, the personnel of such a structure, and complete conformity to its standards and requirements." No wonder people have gone searching for meaningful metaphors outside the business world. Chaos

theory and fractals, neural nets, intranets, and internets sound a lot more interesting than "functional conformity."

Just under this definition we find one for *organize*—"to cause or develop an organic structure; to form into a coherent unity or functioning whole: INTEGRATE…. and to arrange elements into a whole of interdependent parts. " Now we are getting somewhere.

It's interesting isn't it that in our definitions of business organizations we seem to have latched onto the drier side of the issue—administration and conformity; we've lost the juicy bit about interdependency and integration. That's the bit we want to explore in depth in the Well this year.

So let's go a little further and find out what Webster has to say about the meaning of *system*. "A regularly interacting or interdependent group…forming a unified whole; a group of interacting bodies…under the influence of related forces; a group…that together form one or more vital functions; an organization…forming a network especially for distributing something or serving a common purpose." Then at the very end we find, "an organized society or social situation regarded as stultifying." Ouch!

Now we cheated a little bit. We left out some of the words in these definitions of a system. The only one that Webster applies to people is the last one. All the other definitions are related to rivers, and organs, and ideas, and highways, and processes. If we can extrapolate from this, as soon as people get organized and become a system, some vitality disappears. We need to get behind this, look a little deeper at why this might be so.

Our definition of an organization is "a living system." That implies dynamism, vitality, growth, learning, interaction with the environment, and so on. This is more like Webster's definition of an *organism*: "a complex structure of interdependent and subordinate elements whose relations and properties are largely determined by their function in the whole."