

Black Holes & Human Potential



By Ron Lutka

A better, more powerful person—employee in this case—is of increased value to the organization he helps when he is able to unleash his constructive human potential. But that is only half the story of human potential.

Many people apply effort, sometimes tremendous effort, thoughtful ingenuity, and other resources to develop their human potential. Doing so often produces solid gains for the individual and any party he is assisting. However, there is a second half to the human potential equation. The other half resides in the person's, or in this case employee's, environment.

Environments Affect Potential

If a cyclist wants to cycle between two cities as quickly as humanly possible, he would likely plan to cycle on a day that he would not be riding into a strong headwind. The ability to judge the environment and its affect on a desired outcome factors into human potential. A swimmer who desires to swim across Lake Ontario would likely try to avoid a heavy chop and would grease his body to slow heat loss to achieve the desired outcome. The environment one is dealing with must be considered, either to remove barriers or to take advantage of opportunities, to maximize human potential.

Employees who have improved their knowledge base, speed of calculation, memory retention and recall, decisiveness, judgement, confidence, contact base, communication skills, and other attributes can still find themselves bucking a headwind or swimming in a choppy sea. An employee's environment can be a rough place in which to excel. For example, a sane, orderly, predictable environment—where the participants are working toward a common goal or at least share a common interest that brings them together—nourishes potential. On the other hand, a hostile, conflicting, confusing environment squelches it.

Examples of Opposing Forces

For sales personnel, competition between organizations provides an opposing force as competing sales teams try to lure customers into buying their organization's products or services. Competition for capital can likewise provide an opposing force whereby investors with capital invest in Company B, in opposition to the chief financial officer of Company A who is trying to raise capital that will enable Company A to expand or survive. Many brilliant ideas never get off the ground because of opposing forces.

If these external opposing forces were to be minimized or removed, it might be easy to conclude that human potential could be increased—if we define human potential as achieving a desired outcome. However, opposing forces are not always external.

Black Holes in Organizations

There exists an opposing force of incredible strength and obscurity within organizations. This opposing force, known as black holes in organizations, is defined as:

An area of an organization where there is, unbeknownst to management, an abundance of undesirable activities or a lack of desirable activities, both of which destroy organizations.

Black holes are created by a breakdown of basic, usually repetitive, activities of the organization at the "micro" level. Several micro-level failings can lead to the creation of a black hole that absorbs the potential of the organization. However, management generally pays very little attention to failings at the micro level. Such failings are allowed to stack up and choke the potential of employees within the organization and the potential of the organization itself.

As the definition above states, management might be aware of problems that are caused by black holes; however, management is definitely unaware of the root cause of the problems—the black hole-creating issues. The fact that it is so difficult to detect a black hole festering away within an organization is one reason why a black hole is so harmful. It is also why management, in trying to solve the result of a problem and not the root cause of the problem, does not take effective action or takes incorrect action.

It is easy to understand management's misdirected energy because the presence of black holes makes it difficult to distinguish the cause of a problem from the result, due in part to the long, interrelated chain reactions involved between cause and effect.

Human Potential Frustrated

Black holes frustrate human potential because they act as an opposing force. They thwart the achievement of desired outcomes that employees are trying to realize for the organization they serve. Often they thwart the achievement of personal objectives too, such as earning a bonus or completing a job on time instead of working overtime.

Almost any department in an organization—such as pricing, service and installation, shipping, production, storehouse, inspection, marketing, contract administration, data entry, estimating, or purchasing—can have black holes. Black holes within departments can create larger black holes that permeate the organization. The pervasiveness and hidden aspect of black holes spidering throughout an organization, below management's radar, multiplies their ability to frustrate staff and management.

Treasury might use up the line of credit and need to seek additional financing because black holes hurt sales. Suddenly, a grand initiative management was about to launch must go on hold until the cash flow issue is resolved. An accounts payable clerk can be frustrated by demands to keep accounts payable within the discount periods vendors grant if the data feeding into the accounts payable sub-ledger is erroneous. In such a case, the clerk is required to continuously investigate and sort out issues. There are many other examples of black holes at work frustrating the work and potential of employees and thereby limiting or even destroying the potential of the organization.

Facilitating Human Potential

Sometimes, to compensate for the build-up of frustration, management will give speeches or issue newsletters meant to inspire employees. The benefits gained from such hype are extremely temporary, if any benefit truly exists at all. A pep talk or a rallying of the troops might last the afternoon. Reinforced several times it might last a week or two before old habits return—if they are even broken since the root cause of the problem remains.

Repeated attempts to keep the players "juiced" is like trying to hold a twenty-pound lead ball in the air. It takes energy and is wearing. On the other hand, if a defined barrier can be removed the benefit to human potential can remain in existence for as long as that barrier remains removed. When black hole-creating items are terminated at the level of root causes, employees have a far better opportunity to achieve desired outcomes.

If steps were taken so that the data feeding into the accounts payable sub-ledger was correct, then the accounts payable clerk would be able to keep accounts payable within the discount periods vendors grant. The clerk would be more productive and valuable to the organization and the organization would achieve lower cost benefits. If other steps were taken that reduce expenses, boost sales and improve cash flow, treasury would not use up the line of credit and would not need to seek additional financing. The grand initiative that management was about to launch could go ahead on time, further improving the potential of the organization.

Identifying and removing barriers to potential is gold to an HR specialist who is entrusted with managing the organization's human resources. Being able to identify and remove root causes of black holes, hence maximizing the potential of human resources, can move an HR specialist out of an administrative role and into the executive suite.

Conclusion

There can easily be a dozen, or even hundreds, of black hole-creating items affecting an organization of modest size. This frustrates human potential of individual employees. More importantly, it also diminishes the potential dynamic of the group or organization itself. After all, an organization is little more than a group of individuals working towards a common goal. On the other hand, decisive elevation of human potential via the eradication of black holes in turn elevates the potential of the entire organization.

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