

Business Craftsmanship

—a right-brain approach to organizational transformation

by Tobias Mayer, 13 May, 2013

Business craftsmanship is concerned with organizational transformation and enlightenment. It can loosely be thought of as a framework—and certainly utilizes one—but framework is not quite the right term to describe this approach as the term implies stability, and usually a clearly defined set of rules. Scrum¹ is a good example of an organizational framework. It has clearly defined components, namely roles, meetings, artifacts, and values. These are fixed, and failure to embrace the whole usually results in a collapse of the framework. Business craftsmanship in contrast is a shape-shifting container of emergent and emerging ideas based on experience and intuition. It offers guidance for different ways we may choose to show up for work, towards the purposeful goal of organizational greatness. These ideas are not requirements, and are better considered as an offer—a springboard for fresh thinking.

I use the craftsmanship metaphor to foster an artisan’s mindset toward transformation, and move us away from the more common engineering approaches, e.g. business process reengineering, which too often encourage *computomorphism*—the attribution of mechanistic qualities to living entities. This tendency leads to the depersonalization of the organization, and the degradation of its people and their heartfelt interactions to mere objects and signals. While a systems view is certainly useful, it tends to encourage left-brain thinking, so it is important to balance this with a more artistic, right-brain view². Human colonies are deeply complex, and to comprehend this complexity requires the use of the whole brain.

Business Transformation

Creating or running a business requires continuous focus on many areas: the individual, the team, the group or division, the organization as a whole, and of course, the customer. While it is impossible to keep all the people happy all the time, it is essential to embrace, rather than fear, the conflict that naturally occurs. Often, the tendency is to seek compliance and short-term solutions to “keep things moving.” This results in compromise—integrity, quality, personal engagement, and sound business decisions are pushed aside in the efforts to make money, keep a customer happy, or hit a “window of opportunity.”

With the best of intentions, companies seeking short-term gain find themselves struggling to buoy up dissatisfied workers, patch up shoddy products or reassure angry customers. Better process is sought, frameworks are employed, consultants are hired, new management layers are created, accountability is enforced, with the result that things only get worse. This can be described as doing the wrong thing righter³. There is another way. It focuses on citizenship rather than leadership, and seeks to engage everyone in all areas of improvement. In other words, it starts with self.

In this article I'll introduce some values, agreements and meta-practices that I have found helpful during my years as a coach, facilitator, and organizational consultant. My experience is rooted first in social groupwork, and more recently in agile⁴ principles and scrum practices. If I have learned one thing it is this: there is no answer. There is never an answer; there are only better questions. Exploring those questions from a sound values- and agreements-based foundation allows us to venture forth with trust and community, sharing in failure and success alike, and embracing each equally.

Participating in the foundation or growth of a successful company requires each of us to develop a mindful, compassionate way of being towards one another—manager, report, co-worker and customer alike, all are deserving of equal kindness and understanding. Continually seeking a balance between values, agreements and practices will help us on that quest. Values inspire us, agreements guide us, and practices serve us. Values represent a way of being, practices a way of doing—and agreements hold that awakening, balancing space in between.

Although the values, agreements and practices I outline here appear hard-coded and final, don't be fooled. This is only a necessity of the printed word, and is merely how it appears to me at this time of writing. The suggestions are incomplete and insufficient (for your context). Consider them as a starting point for your own exploration.

Personal Values

“Be the change that you wish to see in the world.” — Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

If change starts with the individual, as this quote suggests, then it is vital we look inward before attempting to change our surroundings—or anyone else. Introspection requires a rigorous self-assessment, followed by a commitment to aspire to the ideals we believe important. In a work context, what we are seeking is to build a healthy, autonomous community of which we are (or are to be) a part. A healthy community requires good citizenship. The concept of citizen is elegant and simple. Maintaining a balance between rights and responsibilities, the good citizen gives and receives in equal proportion, each offering what he can, while reaping the rewards of the citizenship as a whole. The good citizen is present in body and spirit for his neighbors, and for his community, and he contributes in time and taxes to the maintenance and improvement of his city. A city is built by its citizens, and the more each citizen is involved in the process the more each will come to love his city, and thus to care for its infrastructure, its culture, and its inhabitants.

Mapping this to the world of work we can see the corporation as the city, the department as the neighborhood, and the team as the personal community. Just as we have friends in different parts of a city, we may have colleagues and co-workers in different departments throughout the organization—and we find our own ways to maintain and nurture those relationships. The expectations of the worker in the corporation should be the same as the expectations for a citizen: that he will be responsible for the well-being of self and others, that he will take an interest in community and politics, and that he will raise his voice at injustice.

Using some well-established values that engender good citizenship we can begin the process of personal introspection, asking ourselves the two-part question, “how well do I live this value—where do I struggle?”

1. Courage — *seek your edge; speak from your heart*
2. Trust — *lead from a place of faith, not suspicion; follow likewise*
3. Empathy — *seek to understand; show affection, passion, partiality; blur the line between self and other*
4. Congruency — *act with integrity, so your actions and your feelings are always in alignment*
5. Service — *be alert to the needs and gifts of others; offer and accept help in a balanced way, for service is in the receiving as much as in the giving*

There are many other values you may wish to reflect on, such as respect, kindness, honesty, and commitment, but I’ve found that the five considered here, when properly understood, include many of these other, more intuitive values.

Shared Agreements

The key thing about a values foundation is that it is personal, and although the striving is ultimately to build community, our own values can be lived independently of the reactions of others. But assuming community follows, we need to find common ground from which to perform cohesively and collaboratively. This is where shared agreements are useful. While values represent Be, and practices represent Do, I see a dialog of agreements as holding that space in between being and doing. I don’t quite have the right word for this representation, but it is something like Common Awakening or Human Expression. Agreements give us a common language, a base from which to explore, and a boundary for us to be constrained by.

In my experience of facilitating and guiding organizational change I have found the five agreements described here to be a good way to start the process of shifting from left-brain to right-brain thinking—to develop a craftsman’s approach to transformation. I use the term framework for this set of agreements, as embraced holistically it creates a robust structure from which to both launch on a journey, and reflect along the way.

1. Purpose — *start by knowing why; care about what you are doing*
2. Focus — *set priorities, minimize the amount of work in progress, reduce context switching, seek completion*
3. Release — *allow teams to occur, and solutions to emerge; let go of control*
4. Alignment — *reflect, reconceive, adjust, and revise in concert with all parties*
5. Rhythm — *allow a regular heartbeat to emerge; flow follows cadence*

These five agreements work in accord with each other to create the environment we strive for with, for example, agile, scrum, or kanban⁵ implementations. The combination of focus, alignment and rhythm gives us the empirical process; release accentuates the value of trust, promotes low-level decision making, and creates the environment for emergent self-organization; focus allows a reduction in waste; rhythm ensures regular delivery, and provides the mechanism for quickly surfacing organizational dysfunction; and purpose coupled with release offers the

possibility of true engagement. These agreements, abstracted from any specific or prescribed process allow the emergence of a new process suited to context.

For new transformations there is a flow through these five agreements from organization (purpose, focus), through group (focus, release, alignment), to team (alignment, rhythm). In more seasoned organizations the set will be embraced holistically, in all areas of the business.

Meta-Practices

Practices should not be confused with tools and techniques. Workflow boards, burndown charts, story points, and velocity (or my preference, capacity) graphs⁶ (to name a few) are tools, while activities such as daily standup meetings, retrospectives, colocation, and pair programming are techniques. The practices I call attention to here are higher level practices—thus meta-practices—the implementation of which may include some or all of the aforementioned tools and techniques, and are likely to embrace many others, including new ones that were designed or have emerged for the purpose and context.

1. Listen — *take time to hear the needs and ideas of others; ask open, exploratory questions; practice dialog beyond discussion*
2. Collaborate — *cultivate a yes-and, because-of-that, help-me-to-see-it mindset; learn to play*
3. Radiate — *be transparent, visualize the work, share openly, raise concerns early*
4. Reconceive — *embrace conflict, rise above compromise*
5. Pause — *be still; maximize the amount of work not done; breathe*

I have found all five of these meta-practices indispensable when helping organizations create a learning culture. Each practice alone is helpful, but the synergy generated by the five together is greater than the sum of each individual part. These practices spark each other to generate a vibrant and edgy workplace that can utilize the framework of agreements, and respect the personal values of those within it.

Organizational transformation is always an overwhelming task. Leaders attempting to take on such transformation without including all the people comprising that organization will always meet with resistance. Real change doesn't happen overnight, and may take months or years depending on the size of the organization. Ongoing support and commitment from those affected is essential. Engaging everyone in the quest for greatness is thus a wise strategy. To do this, power needs to be relinquished from above and autonomy claimed from the grass roots. It takes a village to raise a child—that child's own village, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker, not solely the church elders and civic leaders. Likewise, it takes a community to transform an organization—that organization's own community, each and every member. Foster engagement, champion autonomy, nurture the human spirit, and let go. Great things will follow.

Footnotes

¹ Scrum is defined more fully by the governing organizations, The Scrum Alliance, and Scrum.Org.

² The theory, which stems from the work of Roger W. Sperry (1913-1994), that the left hemisphere of the brain is logical, and the right creative is not conclusively proven, and by many considered a myth. It is however a useful metaphor for making this logical/creative distinction. There is also some evidence (e.g. John McCrone, *The New Scientist*, July 2000) that the left hemisphere is concerned with detail, and the right with the big picture, which is also interesting, and pertinent for this article. Both theories indicate that the two sides of the brain complement each other, and so for an holistic approach to working with complexity it is wise to engage both hemispheres of the brain in the best way we can.

³ The phrase “doing the wrong thing, righter” was coined by organizational theorist and systems thinker, Russell Ackoff (1919-2019)

⁴ The umbrella term “agile” is outlined in *The Agile Manifesto*, agilemanifesto.org (2001)

⁵ Kanban as a process is described in *Kanban: Successful Evolutionary Change for Your Technology Business*, by David Anderson, Blue Hole Press (April, 2010)

⁶ Workflow boards, burndown charts, story points, and velocity graphs are described in *Agile Estimating and Planning*, by Mike Cohn, Prentice Hall (November, 2005)