Beyond Blaming: Congruence in Large Systems Development Projects

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"England, though at present enjoying a very high state of prosperity, still shows some symptoms of a decaying nation. Propose to an Englishman any principle, or any instrument, however admirable, and you will observe that the whole effort of the English mind is directed to finding a difficulty, a defect, or an impossibility in it. If you speak to him of a machine for peeling a potato, he will pronounce it impossible; if you peel a potato with it before his eyes, he will declare it useless, because it will not slice a pineapple. Impart the same principle or show the same machine to an American, or to one of our colonists, and you will observe that the whole effort of his mind is to find some new application of the principle, some new use for the instrument."

— Charles Babbage, 1852

As early as 1852, Charles Babbage could see symptoms of decay and infer from them a vision of future performance. In so doing he provides a perfect description of the blaming style of communication that emerges in "decaying" organizations — be they nations or software engineering organizations. What is a blaming style of communication, and why is it important in systems development?

WHAT IS CONGRUENCE?

In order to answer these questions, you should first understand the concept of congruence. Congruence describes the human experience of alignment between the internal and external—what is thought and felt (the

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internal), and what is said and how it is said (the external).

In order to operate congruently in the world, you need to take into account three general factors: self (the internal world), other (the immediate external world of people), and context (the larger external world of things, structures, processes, laws, and cultures).

♦ *Self:* You must consider your own needs and capabilities. Suppose you are a manager who doesn't trust anyone else's judgment, so you try to attend every technical meeting. Doing this, you're likely to overload all your available time and then be unable to do the managerial job, or to make real technical contributions in any case.

♦ *Other:* You must consider the needs and capabilities of other people. For instance, if you are a programmer who refuses to be bothered to write readable code, then testing and maintenance of your code will be a great burden, if not an impossibility.

♦ *Context:* You must consider the reality of the context in which you are operating. For instance, if you are a manager who insists on sticking with an old design that no longer has the

capacity to handle the task, your project may be doomed no matter how hard everyone works. Or, if you are a manager in a start-up company and spend money as if the company had a billion-dollar cash balance, your organization may be out of business before its software product is ready for market.

Congruence is integrity at the most basic level and thus has immense value to a project and each individual in it. Without integrity, we cannot build trust; without trust, we don't feel safe; without safety we have a hard time being congruent. Thus, congruence reinforces congruence in a powerful loop that improves the chances of producing a quality product, on time, and within budget.

On the other hand, the same loop causes incongruence to reinforce incongruence. If a project is allowed to ride such a downward spiral, the integrity of information is destroyed. Soon it becomes impossible for anyone to know what is really happening. Such projects invariably fail, and when they fail, they are invariably found to have been keeping two sets of "books." Their external picture is not congruent with their internal picture, and they die. Or worse yet, live forever—the living dead.

If congruence is so important for project success, why aren't all projects congruent? One reason is that congruence is not without a price. Another is that congruence usually involves risk. The level of risk is somewhat contingent on the kind of congruence being demonstrated—mental or emotional.

Mental congruence. In the United States, it's relatively easy to express our thoughts without too much incrimination—freedom of speech was a foundation upon which the country was built. Even so, there may be a price to pay for speaking up. For example, differing with a colleague or someone in authority at the wrong time can put us on a fast track to isolation, reprimands, reduced opportunities, and subtle door

closings. Thus, we've all learned the importance of being careful about what we say, where, and to whom. Saying the wrong thing can lead to heated debates, followed by proclamations of who is right or wrong and who is good or bad. At that point, we've lost most possibilities for enhanced understanding and effective communication.

Emotional congruence. In our culture, strong feelings are reserved for athletic events, celebrations, funerals, near-death experiences, deeply felt spiritual experiences, fights, and exchanges between intimate others, the very young, and the very old. We even have many feelings about our feelings, and some of the strongest have to do with shame and embarrassment over having them. Feelings are personal and lie close to our heart, where we are tender and vulnerable. No wonder we have all become so skilled at denying our feelings—which necessarily makes us incongruent.

Suppose you are a developer who is scared that you won't be able to deliver a product when you promised. You try to tell your manager about your fear, but he tells you in no uncertain terms what will happen to you if you don't express more confidence. "Why are you so negative? Aren't you a team player?" One way to protect yourself from such negative responses is to live in your head. Perhaps you say, "It's just an estimate; I'm not attached to it," meaning you won't be hurt because you've distanced yourself sufficiently to ward off anything that might hint at rejection. But, though you deny your scared feeling to your manager, you still feel it, squashed down inside. You can stand back away from your ideas, but you always remain standing in your feelings. And, of course, you have been incongruent, and deprived your manager of your best information.

When you share your feelings, your heart-self is being presented to the outer world—exposed to the elements. When you're scared and express your

fear while maintaining consideration for the other person (your manager) and the context (the project), you are being congruent. Your critical issue here is, "Can I share my feelings and still be in control?" If the environment of your project is blaming, it threatens to remove your control if you tell the truth—so the temptation to lie about your feelings and your ideas increases. That's why blaming cultures lead to "double books," and that's how they lead to failure.

WHAT IS BLAMING?

In a congruent organization, your manager asks, "Where does your project stand?" and you answer, "I'm rather scared that I'm not going to make my schedule." This starts a problem-solving discussion, out of which the two of you make new plans to get the project back on track. In a blaming organization, however, your manager may well tell you that only inferior people lack confidence. In that case, problem solving will be replaced by blame avoidance.

From a writer's point of view, congruent interactions aren't very dramatic; people just act sensibly, are considerate of one another, get their work done, and enjoy what they're doing. That kind of behavior might not make as good a soap opera scene as your manager throwing a tantrum and you cringing in the corner, but it definitely makes a better project.

Not that a blaming culture conducts every interaction in a dramatic, blaming way. Under ordinary circumstances, congruent coping is the rule, but if circumstances were always ordinary, we wouldn't need managers. When feelings of self-esteem are low, they are manifest much more dramatically in characteristic incongruent coping styles: blaming, placating, being superreasonable, loving or hating, and acting irrelevant. We can't deal with all

of these in a short article,[1] so let's discuss blaming, perhaps the most common and most directly destructive of the coping styles (for more on how incongruent styles impact software work, see elsewhere[3]).

Under stress, people tend to lose their balance. So they may ignore one or more of the three essential components (self, other, context), leading to a characteristically incongruent coping style. For example, when people fail to take other people into account, they fall into a blaming posture. Here is a typical blaming action you might see in a software organization (in this style of speaking, multiple stressed words such as the bold ones below are a linguistic sign of blaming[2]):

> Manager, as programmer arrives late for a meeting: "You're **always** late. You **never** show **any** consideration for **other** people.

Why is this incongruent? If the manager really is feeling and thinking that the programmer is always late and inconsiderate, isn't she being congruent by saying so? Yes, but that isn't what this manager said. She didn't say, "It's my impression that you're always late to my meetings." Instead, she pronounced her impression of lateness as if it were a scientific fact, never offering the possibility that the programmer might have a different impression. She generalized experience in her meetings as if they necessarily applied to all meetings, never allowing for the possibility that her experience might not be the only one that counts.

If the manager really is feeling and thinking that the programmer is always late and inconsiderate, she might say, "I think that you're always late, and I feel that you're not being considerate of me and the others. Is this your perception, too?" (And leave out the stressed words.) Even better management style would be to give the programmer a chance to provide a different perception before launching into interpretation. At

the very least, this prevents embarrassment in situations such as the following:

> Manager, as programmer arrives late for a meeting: "It seems to me that you're always late. Is this your perception, too?"

> Programmer: "Yes, and I feel bad about it. The reason I'm always late is that I donate blood for my nine-year-old son, who's dying of leukemia, and the only time they take donations is just before this meeting."

> Manager: "I'm sorry about your son. I didn't know about it. Let's figure out a new meeting schedule so you don't have to be late."

More generally, it allows for the possibility that other considerations may count besides those of this one manager. For example, perhaps the programmer is coming from a meeting with customers—a regularly scheduled meeting that overlaps the manager's meeting.

But what if the programmer really is always late, with no reasonable explanation? Isn't the manager then entitled to blame the programmer? Not really, because this situation is not about entitlement, but about getting the project done. For that purpose, the problem is

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most effectively resolved using a non-blaming confrontation with the facts about the unacceptable behavior. By foregoing blaming, the manager keeps the communication clear and open, maximizing the chance that the programmer will receive the intended message. And, of course, receiving the intended message maximizes the

chance (though it doesn't guarantee) that the problem will be solved.

When blaming, problem solving is less likely because the facts of the case

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become a minor issue. The major issue in blaming is who is important and who is insignificant. When blaming, a person is saying in effect, "I am everything, you are nothing." Of course, this stance comes not from really thinking "I am everything," but from just the opposite. Directing the attention at another person—and blaming is often accompanied by a pointed finger—is a self-protective device to distract others from the inadequacy the blamer feels.

Like all incongruent coping, blaming is reinforced by feelings of low self-esteem. When you blame, you attempt to build yourself up by tearing down others because you don't have the confidence that you can amount to much—or even survive—any other way.

Blaming usually fools people who are unsophisticated, or whose own self-esteem is at a low ebb. The knowledgeable observer, however, sees the amount of blaming as a sure measure of how inadequate the blamer feels. Moreover, if blaming is the preferred project communication style, then it becomes a measure of how far an environment has degenerated: how little communication is being directed at the project's issues, compared to the amount that is being directed to puff-

ing up the communicator's weak self-esteem.

In a blaming organization, it's not merely the managers who blame, as illustrated by these examples:

♦ Programmer, when asked by a manager to volunteer to talk to a job applicant: "Why don't you do it yourself? I'm not going to do your job for you. If you were better organized, you wouldn't need to ask me such things."

♦ Customer, when project manager asks about the possibility of revising the requirements: "You never get the requirements right the first time. If I told you once, I told you a thousand times: Do the job right the first time, then you won't bother me with revisions."

(To test your understanding of the blaming style of communication, you might try to improve the congruence of these examples.)

How blaming hurts a project. Of course, people are not perfect, so it's impossible to conduct a large project without occasions on which people cope incongruently. Normal project management can deal with these situations, when they are exceptional. But when the whole environment encourages blame, each new situation further elaborates the incongruence. Fred Brooks[3] once asked, "How does a one-year project get to be two years late?" His answer was "one day at a time." Our answer is "one incongruent communication at a time," as the following example illustrates:

> One of the developers was building a module that would produce a printed report when it was tested. The manager put a lot of pressure on the developer to be ready on time, with no excuses allowed. The programmer produced the proper report, and the manager was pleased (though he didn't show it, of course—it was "just an expected part of the job" in this blaming culture).
>
> A month later, other people tried to use this module and discovered that it was

not finished after all. The developer had used a word processor to produce a fake report that looked just like a correct test report should look. He thought this would buy him time (it was a month, after all, until anybody found out) to finish the module. Unfortunately, since he was in over his head, a month wasn't enough time.

The manager blamed the programmer. The programmer said nothing, because in this culture of blame, saying something only brought further streams of blame down on your head. The person who reported this incident said that, in this organization, failure is not allowed under any circumstances. People who have problems in a project and can foresee slippage are unable to cry "Help!" and receive appropriate assistance. According to the managers, each programmer is responsible for meeting the deadlines that the programmer agreed to. Inaccurate estimation is "not allowed" and perfection is to be achieved from day one—otherwise you are put in the pillory of blame. In this situation, fake test reports are the rule, not the exception.

Blaming is the dark secret underlying the failure of many projects. A blaming culture hurts a project in at least six major ways:

♦ People commit to plans they know they cannot achieve, at least to delay blame.

♦ People hide facts that managers need to control the project, as in the fake-report example.

♦ When problems are finally revealed, people avoid coming forth with creative solution ideas, for fear they will be blamed if the ideas don't work, or even if they simply appear to be dumb ideas at first glance.

♦ In day-to-day operations, a major portion of people's effort is devoted to positioning themselves so they will not be accused when the time of reckoning arrives.

♦ Those people who somehow feel

safe enough to focus on the job at hand find themselves spending large amounts of time checking up on the reliability of others' communications.

♦ People feel bad most of the time and spend a lot of time fiddling with unproductive tasks or simply staring at the walls.

WHAT INCONGRUENCE LOOKS AND FEELS LIKE

Organizations can be changed from a culture of blame to a culture of congruence. To make this change, the first step is measurement, or at least detection—but how do we measure blaming? Actually, an experienced consultant can detect a blaming organization within a few minutes of contact, because symptoms are everywhere. Indeed, people within the organization already know it's a blaming culture—but of course within a blaming culture, blame is undiscussable, and moreover, the undiscussability is also undiscussable.[4] Paradoxically, the existence of undiscussability makes blaming easy to detect. The manager of one project issued a memo saying that there would be no more discussion of project morale, and that he would entertain no questions on the subject because everyone should be grateful to be working on such a terrific project. This could happen only in a blaming organization.

Executives. A culture of blame usually starts at the top. Members of the top level of management are inclined to see the other people in the organization as the source of all problems. The employees are seen as "ungrateful" for the jobs, pay, benefits, and opportunities management has bestowed on them. They are seen to "lack an appropriate work ethic," "not know the value of a dollar," "have authority problems," and "resist change." These perceptions leave upper management in a predicament: "Do I fire them, or do I fire the people who hired them?"

Such managers feel that they are trying to realize a vision without getting the necessary support, which leaves them out on a limb. The internal kinesthetic experience of these executives is normally a dull and chronic headache—unless the profit margin is really down. In that case, they have more acute feelings, like pain in the chest and burning in the gut. Their low self-esteem reflects outwardly in the form of frequent downsizing, re-engineering, avoiding serious problems, futile memos, and, of course, humiliating of subordinates. Towards themselves, they often practice addictive and self-destructive behaviors (which cannot be discussed, but are always the subject of gossip).

Middle management. When the top leadership is incongruent, middle managers constantly receive mixed messages. Project managers are told of their importance, then find that their seniors have bypassed them to intervene directly in projects or change the rules without consulting them. They feel as if they are living on a roller coaster—unable to predict whether a particular day or week will be an upper or downer. After being publicly humiliated a few times, they decide that their best strategy is to try to stay out of trouble by not ever rocking the boat. Even though they cannot perform at their best, they try to appear important and extremely useful.

In the blaming organization, top managers try (perhaps unconsciously) to teach their middle managers their own blaming attitudes. When one project manager complained of her inability to get the developers to work faster, the vice president of development said, "If your dog won't jump high enough, get a bigger stick to beat it with." Living in the hail of such incongruence from above, middle managers' survival issues stay close to the surface. As they did when they were children, they figure out how to either appease, please,

or avoid the power owners. By so doing they ensure their survival—and pass the blame on to lower levels.

Employees. At the bottom rung of a blaming organization, employees are usually looking for someplace else to work unless the company is in a stable condition with little competition—or if their retirement is within view. The way to survive is to hide out and appear only to pick up a regular paycheck.

Employees are discouraged from thinking creatively—new ideas are interpreted as blaming the management or attempting to usurp their power and prerogatives. Employees are not rewarded for industriousness—but they are frequently punished for perceived "laziness." Employees cannot seem to find their managers—except when there are problems. Then, the major efforts are directed at attaching blame rather than solving the problem at hand.

The style of blaming varies from organization to organization. It can be harsh, vindictive, direct, or indirect—but it is always contagious. Some organizations have polished their blaming

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style to a high degree of subtlety—without raised voices, merely by a look, a memo, an e-mail message, or a phone call, or a visit if things are really bad. In other organizations, the blame is loud, angry, and frequently done in front of an audience of peers—ensuring that all get the message of who is right, who is good, who is in charge, and who should become invisible.

In such an environment, defensiveness becomes pervasive. To those without formal power and authority, it seems that those with power really

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don't care about them—and would banish them with no feeling at all. Thus they feel justified in retaliating (in advance, and in secret) and in avoiding their managers and their problems.

Regardless of the style, blaming from the top always generates fear, malaise, errors, accidents, and passive-aggressive responses from the bottom. Those on the bottom feel small and act from a place of powerlessness. The lack of emotional safety erodes trust and makes any attempt at congruence extremely risky. This environment sounds awful and it is—both for the person who has regressed into emotional immaturity and, sadly, for the person at the top who is doing the blaming.

Those on the bottom of any large organization can easily come to feel a sense of dependency on those above them in the hierarchy. When blaming is the primary mode of dealing with people, this dependency is exacerbated. Then, out of a feeling of dependency, people easily generate feelings of hostility. As this hostility grows so does the debilitating experience of shame— that overly critical judge that lies latent in all humans.

WHAT CONGRUENCE WOULD LOOK AND FEEL LIKE

Most people who have experienced a congruent organization won't tolerate the misery of working in a blaming organization. But many people haven't ever had that experience, and have a hard time believing what a congruent organization is really like. Let's look at what would happen if a healthy dose of congruence could be magically applied on a large scale to an incongruent project organization.

Executives. If we could magically install congruence in the internal programs of those blaming executives, their style would shift dramatically. For example, if they would truly consider the others involved in their communication, they would be more likely to believe in the intent of people to contribute, to be productive, to belong, and to learn—and would take deviations from this ideal as evidence of ineffective management. Their belief in the inherent value of all people, along with a healthy respect for the constraints of the work context, would engender energy, hope, appreciation, understanding, and gratitude among their employees.

An executive who truly does not believe in the good intentions of the employees will be likely to say, "No excuses! You will get this done on October 1." But, with employees whose intentions are bad, this style (or any other style) isn't really going to work.

A congruent executive who truly does believe in the good intentions of the employees will be likely to say, "We need this badly by October 1. What do you need from us to help get it?" This kind of mutuality and support enlivens a genuine "can do" feeling that increases the chance that a project meets its goals— and that nobody has to make false promises to escape abusive blaming.

When the top-level managers sus-

tain their commitment to congruence, they see that most workers appreciate the opportunity the business provides them in developing skills, meaning, relationships, and monetary rewards. They also know how to cope when the occasional worker doesn't seem appreciative or even productive. Managers who know how to use their power congruently generally get the results they seek—not perfection, which they know not to expect.

These leaders know they have a special kind of power—power they use with awareness and sensitivity. They do not resist accountability to those they lead, but demonstrate the same level of integrity they seek from others. And if they cannot match the levels of commitment they request from others, they are open about that. They know they are sometimes going to be weak and vulnerable and need support—perhaps even to see the value of their own visions. They use their awareness of this human reality to nurture their capacity to empathize and to have compassion for themselves and others.

Congruent executives know that their principal job is developing their organization's capability, not just pushing the same old shoddy products and services out the door. They involve themselves seriously in organizational improvement efforts while simultaneously involving others in the organization to ground these efforts in real-life, practical operational input and decision making. They know that synergy is needed for organizational development, and that synergy comes from high-quality connections among people—regardless of level.

Middle management. When the top folks begin to operate from congruence, the middle managers receive direct, clear messages—not mixed messages with double meanings. Communications are more open, making it easier to know more about what's really going on. Given higher quality information, they know more

about how to be useful, so they can more easily join their leaders in their visions. Knowing more clearly the strategic directions desired and feeling that they count in this process frees them to contribute more generously and thoughtfully—rather than merely playing safe. Success becomes a goal that all can share.

Given their unique vantage points, middle people have useful input to help predict problems, project realistic time lines, and forecast trends. What they see, hear, think, and feel is valued, and they are in a position to initiate behaviors that prevent project weaknesses from growing into project failure. They know the necessity of interdependence, so if major problems do develop, they can be counted on to provide—and seek—truthful information. They are not ashamed or afraid to work for those who employ them. Indeed, they have pride about their commitment to the organization—and know it is a commitment not so much to schedules and budgets, but to the truth about schedules and budgets.

Because congruence at the top trickles down, middle managers take notice of the difference in their leaders. They respond to the modeling by passing it on to their constituencies. Everyone in the organization knows what is at stake in doing each job well, so everyone feels safe to tell what is wrong, what is getting in the way, and what is needed to fix it. Honest reporting of facts and feelings is genuinely appreciated, and does not put people at risk of being humiliated or losing their jobs. That's why congruent organizations deliver their projects as promised.

Congruent middle managers encourage high-quality communication. Their belief in people's ability to learn and change toward more congruence makes those around them responsive. With congruence radiating from the center of the organization, everyone can have a place, position, and function of importance and value—so things get done, and done right.

Employees. Working at the front line of a business where the top leadership is congruent is an entirely different experience from working in a blaming organization. Commitment and energy are the norm, not the exception practiced by new employees until they "learn the way things are around here."

Congruent organizations hold to an ideology that doing well in the marketplace is connected to doing well with employees as well as with customers. The perspective of the leadership includes a global consciousness about the existence of multiple nonlinear factors, the importance of connections among all the various parts of the whole, and the necessity of all parts knowing their value. Workers feel that this is a company going somewhere, where growth is a natural state, and everyone's efforts count.

Workers in a congruent organization tend to have a long-range view and can usually maneuver as needed to meet the changing needs of clients and customers. Employees trust that what they see and hear is real. They share in the enthusiasm of creating a future. They may not like everything that happens—for instance, they don't always feel that they are rewarded adequately for what they give—but they don't feel that there is a chronic pattern of undercutting, diminishing, discrediting, and devaluing them and what they do. They can risk congruence knowing that it will act as a catalyst for optimizing successful outcomes that benefit everyone.

Projects. Congruence is the bright secret underlying the success of many projects. A congruent culture helps a project in at least six major ways:
♦ People commit to plans only after open negotiation, so plans are more likely to be realistic in the first place.
♦ People come forth readily with facts that managers need to control the project, as soon as they are known, so managers can act early and act small to correct the problems.

♦ When problems are revealed, people readily come forth with creative solution ideas, increasing the chances for quick and effective solutions.
♦ A major portion of people's effort is devoted to getting their jobs done, and to helping others get their jobs done.
♦ Because human fallibility is considered normal, an appropriate—but small—amount of time is spent assuring the reliability of communications.
♦ People feel good most of the time, and thus are productive most of the time.

CONGRUENCE IN LARGE SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

In the course of developing systems, people engage in numerous acts of communication—about requirements, schedules, interpersonal problems, designs, progress, and just about anything else. That's why effective individual communication is important in all projects, large and small. That being said, effective

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communication becomes even more important as the size of the development effort grows. The number of necessary communications goes up nonlinearly with the size of the project, so the effect of imperfect communication style is magnified. Thus, if the quality of individual communications remains fixed while the project grows, the overall quality of communication will go down.

For instance, a certain level of congru-

ent communication might be adequate for producing a product with 25,000 lines of code, yet be totally unacceptable for a product with 2,500,000 lines of code. In order to develop larger and/or more

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complex systems, then, it's not sufficient to pay attention to technical issues—accepting that the existing communication style will be adequate. Managers must also improve the project's communication culture, and thus they must pay more attention to congruence.

To make matters worse, unless we manage well, tougher projects tend to diminish congruence—because stress tends to rise when the expectation of quality rises. We are not always utterly logical creatures, but have feelings as well as thoughts in response to tougher assignments. When these inner feelings are strong enough, they translate into characteristic styles of coping with the stress. If our characteristic style is incongruent, communications become less effective and the job becomes even more difficult, creating a vicious cycle.[5-7]

Congruence, of course, is but one factor in effective communication; others include such things as timeliness, memory, proper audience, and accuracy of data. But without congruence, your efforts to improve these more "logical" factors will always be seriously undermined, along with your ability to build bigger, more complex, or more reliable systems.

ACHIEVING CONGRUENCE

When W. Edwards Deming said, "Drive fear out of the workplace," we think he was talking about changing the blaming organization to the congruent organization. This kind of change is made by one person at a time—hopefully starting at the top—and one step at a time. The steps can be broken down into six "a"s: *awareness, acceptance, authorship, articulation, application*, and *activism*. Let's look at how each of these steps takes place in the context of an individual trying to change a blaming organization.

Awareness. Awareness says, "This is happening. This is real." Awareness comes from experience, when I allow myself to experience the world around me as it is—not as it is supposed to be, or I wish it to be, or someone else tells me they want it to be.

Awareness is always the first step, and probably the hardest, because generally we're not aware that we're not aware. Here's a personal example of how lack of awareness stops the change process before it can even start:

Jerry was attending a project meeting in a software company—a meeting called by the company president to find out what was going on in a late project. After some coaxing, one of the developers said that she was afraid to go to Nat, the Development Manager, with problems because of the reception she got. Nat got red in the face, stood up, and shouted angrily, "How can you say that? My door is always open to hear your problems! The only thing I won't tolerate is if you're all emotional when you come, or if you don't have a proposed solution!"

In the calmest voice he could manage (it's hard to stay calm when someone is so angry, even if it's not directed at you), Jerry turned to the president and asked if Nat ever came to him

with problems. When the president said yes, Jerry asked if Nat was always calm and carrying a proposed solution. Before the president could answer, Nat interrupted: "Why would I come with a problem if it wasn't important enough to get excited about? And, if I had a solution, why would I come to him?"

Although it was now clear to everyone else in the room that Nat was demanding that others "do as I say, not as I do," he was unable to see the incongruence. Lacking awareness, Nat was never going to change—and indeed he never did change, up to the time the president released him to seek greener pastures.

Nat's case is quite typical. Since incongruence is a defense, incongruent people erect all kinds of shields that close off information about congruence. Their own incongruence, and that of others, is invisible—it is accepted, especially if it is the norm in the organization. This invisibility makes it hard to reach them with any kind of information on the subject.

In other words, when you're being incongruent, you're losing your ability to take in what's going on in the world (inner or outer). So, you don't know that you need changing, and even if you did, you haven't a clue what to change to. No wonder it is so difficult to transform an incongruent culture, when the very first step—awareness—is so hard to come by.

In the blaming organization, where people shield themselves from experience, becoming aware usually requires help. Helping others become aware takes the skill to develop safe environments and to build relationships. It takes patience and caring to watch for signs of awareness and help build on them. It also takes a belief and a commitment that "part of my job is to help the people on my team to develop—the most important part." If you don't believe this, then certainly don't try to

help people become aware. Otherwise, you'll find yourself saying, "You aren't aware of what a lousy employee you are, but I'm going to make you aware!"

But awareness of the overall situation is not sufficient; you also need self-awareness. Self-awareness says, "This is me. This is mine." You may be fully aware of the blaming, but as long as you merely say, "This is a blaming organization," you're not doing anything to change it. When you say, "I am a part of this blaming organization," you move forward. You own the blaming as a part of yourself and your behavior—not just something that "they" do (to you).

Self-awareness is often followed by depression or shame or guilt. Some people react with anger, at themselves or at any convenient target. Yet self-awareness is empowering—the thought that since I own it, it's mine to do something with.

Acceptance. Acceptance moves the change process beyond self-blaming and says, "I'm not a bad person because I do this. My intentions are good, though my actions may not be effective." You understand that taking responsibility is not the same as blaming yourself. Thus, you have mercy on yourself and your all-too-human imperfection. You stop being angry. You forgive yourself for not doing better in the past, based on your present understanding and standards. And, as you forgive and accept yourself, you gain compassion for the others involved—thereby increasing the chance that you can communicate with them and effect change.

When you're trying to reach acceptance, it's critical that you not be punished or humiliated by someone else. You need a little help in getting off your own back, or else you think so little of yourself that you couldn't possibly do anything about the situation. Of course, in a blaming organization you

may have a hard time avoiding this kind of punishment, which is why authorship and acceptance are usually done internally, and kept internal for some time.

Authorship. Authorship is the first decision point, when you say, "I have choices. I can do something about this." With some encouragement, you accept that you are responsible for choice in your life. You understand that you don't have to react, but that you can choose your response—that you create, in large part, your own interpersonal context. You know there are some parts of the context that you can control and some that you can't; and you know accurately which is which.

Articulation. Articulation is the public commitment to change, and says, "I'm going public with this (for accountability and support)." Articulation is ineffective if attempted before the prerequisites are in place. If you can't accept yourself or how you have reflected yourself out to the world, or if you don't know that you have choices or feel you can gain support for those choices, then speaking out is merely ineffective bravado.

When the prerequisites are in place, you cannot be effective by keeping silent—you must decide to speak out. In the process of speaking you transform your inner awareness to another kind of experience. You hear yourself and you notice the response you get from others. You make public, if you will, your self—your mental and emotional position.

Initially, of course, you must seek out safe places to disclose your truer and more honest expressions of your thoughts and feelings. When you become more grounded in the power of your true self, you can seek the kind of support that challenges and confronts you, as opposed to the kind of support that coddles and consoles.

Initial steps of articulating congruence are often awkward. That's

why a responsive and receptive listener satisfies one of the requirements for promoting the development of congruence.

Application. Application says, "These are my choices (my new ways of coping)." You learn to be congruent yourself, first in your most immediate, safe, and encouraging context. Then you expand the contexts in which you can respond congruently. Don't try to "not be incongruent." This paradoxical command only invokes the incongruence of perfectionism: "If I can't be perfectly congruent all the time, I'm worthless." Focus on congruence, practice congruence, and the incongruence "muscles" will simply atrophy.

With support and practice you can begin to use and test congruence in your immediate relationships. We suggest that you continue to design for success, so that initially these tests of your new skill are done within environments where you will more likely be given the benefit of the doubt. As you experience success, then you can be centered even in more turbulent and conflicted arenas. In other words, once you "get the call," don't march into the president's office and announce that henceforth, all the guilty parties must stop blaming, or else.

Focus on congruence, practice congruence, and the incongruence "muscles" will simply atrophy.

Activism. Activism says, "Now that I can make a difference in myself and my most familiar world, I'm going to help spread this throughout the organization." Activism is applied leadership, starting at the point at which you have

enough competence at being congruent to reach out and be proactive—anticipating, initiating, instigating—but not inflicting. You cannot operate from an incongruent position and force other people to be congruent. ("I have to blame them, because they're so blaming. Once they change, then I'll be able to change.")
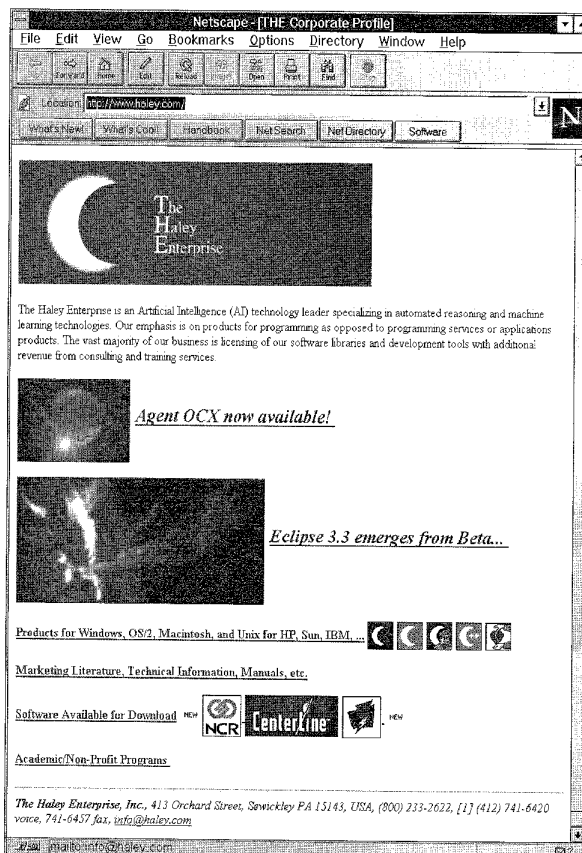
In any case, you don't have to inflict congruence on anyone. Congruence is contagious—when directed consciously to creating a safe, nurturing, productive environment. It may spread more slowly than you'd like, but once it starts moving, it's hard to stop. ◆

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