

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Leadership Tools: The "Holon" Model

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The last third of the twentieth century gave us a number of new models to help leaders analyze their organizations. One that I find particularly intriguing is the concept of "holons, from the Greek word "holos," meaning "whole, entire, or complete."

Your company is a holon. So is your family. Or your church or synagogue. In fact, you yourself are a holon. That's because any entity in the universe can be thought of as a holon

Defining a Holon

Arthur Koestler, who introduced the term in 1967, described a holon as 1) a whole made up of constituent parts, yet 2) a whole which is itself part of another, more complex whole. Thus, an atom is a holon which is part of a more complex holon called a molecule which is part of a holon that is even more complex, e.g., a compound or a cell.

Any organization you lead is also a holon. It is 1) made up of constituent parts and 2) part of a more complex whole. As a consequence, your organization is governed by the same principles that govern holons.

Within any holon four forces work against each other constantly. These forces go by different names, dependent on which theorist you read. But whatever you choose to call them, your role as a leader is to manage the organizational tension they generate.

To visualize the four forces, think of them as operating along two axes, one vertical, the other horizontal. Operating on the vertical axis are factors that impact your organization's further development. Along the horizontal axis are factors that influence your organization's relationship to its environment. For that reason I refer to these axes as "developmental" and "relational."

The Four Forces in a Holon

On each axis, two opposing forces are at work. The upward thrust along the developmental axis is a force called "transcendence." It's the press for your organization to become more than it currently is. To develop further. To transcend itself. To become a new, more comprehensive holon. (One word of caution. This more comprehensive holon is not necessarily larger. Rather it's more sophisticated. More capable. More "developed.")

Working against transcendence is a counterforce called "disintegration." Disintegration draws its energy from the factors conspiring to destroy your organization. To pull it apart. To break it down into its constituent parts, its "sub-holons."

Likewise, two opposing forces run along the relational axis. My typical names for these are "autonomy" (which I picture as pulling to the left) and "affiliation" (pulling to the right). In every organization there are pressures to "go it alone," which promotes autonomy. Tugging against this tendency is another group of factors that make for interdependence with other organizations. (Think of other organizations as other holons.) This attraction promotes affiliation.

The Holon You Lead

Whatever your level of leadership, your unit of oversight is a holon. Unless you are a CEO or part of a top management team, your holon is not the entire organization. Your holon may go by names such as division, department, branch, or even workgroup. But the four holon forces are tugging at your organization, whatever its size and complexity.

As the leader, you are responsible for managing this tug-of-war. In effect, strategy is a broad statement of how you will respond to the interplay of these four forces. What will your organization do to transcend itself? How will it deal with the threats of disintegration? And to what degree will your organization go it alone or team with others?

In the maelstrom of trying to monitor everything that demands leadership attention, the holon model is a helpful device for sorting things out. Everything you are responsible for, every challenge you must contend with, contributes to one of the four holon forces.

So ask yourself: what factors in my organization make for transcendence? Which ones encourage disintegration? What draws my organization toward going it alone? What pushes it instead toward interdependence?

Mapping the Forces

As you think about these issues, create a chart on a sheet of paper. Place the word "transcendence" at the very top, "disintegration" at the bottom, "autonomy" to the left, and "affiliation" to the right. Then, go back through the questions in the previous paragraph. As you answer each question, write your response on the sheet of paper. Cluster responses related to transcendence toward the top, responses related to autonomy toward the left, etc.

The resulting map becomes a useful tool in assessing the health of your organization. Are the forces of disintegration building? Are you locked in a frustrating status quo because of inadequate momentum for transcendence? Do you have a healthy balance of autonomy and affiliation? As you work through these issues, I'm confident you'll gain some valuable new insights. And you will find that thinking in terms of holons is an elucidating way to view organizational life.

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