



## **Our Approach & Underlying Philosophy**

Commonsense Practices for Extraordinary Performance  
In Groups, Teams and Organisations

**An Introduction to Thriving Workplace, by Tom Watkins**

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"There is a crucial difference between declarative knowledge, knowing a concept and its technical details, and procedural knowledge, being able to put those concepts and details into action. Knowing does not equal doing, whether in playing the piano, managing a team, or acting on essential advice at the right moments."

[Daniel Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence.*]

## The Approach & Philosophy Underlying Thriving Workplace

### The Motivation

Two features of my work as an organisational development consultant, trainer and leadership mentor simultaneously sadden and motivate me the most. The first is the prevalence of people who are passionate about their own work, their direct clients and close colleagues but whose passion for their organisation has died. Once inspired and excited by their leaders, they now regard them as ineffectual people whose influence is to be suffered, minimised or disengaged from wherever possible in order to reduce stress and inconvenience. They no longer believe the organisation's potential can be realised.

The second is the prevalence of leaders who do their absolute utmost to serve their ventures and people passionately but no longer seem capable of realising the vision and dreams they once had for them. Often seriously exhausted from extreme overwork, they have become emotionally and intellectually dispirited. Whatever formerly inspired them has been extinguished.

This loss of passion and energy is appalling and unnecessary. I work to help prevent it.

Clearly, within every group of people there is a vast reservoir of goodwill, knowledge, wisdom and talent. The duty of leaders and managers is – and the collective commitment should be – to tap this energy and direct the flow in ways that bring out the best and best-directed efforts in everyone. Unfortunately, conventional efforts often impede the flow or reduce it to a thin trickle.<sup>1</sup> The wastage may go unnoticed, worsen or become accepted as inevitable and unchangeable. Improvement efforts often degenerate into arguments about conflicting solutions. Groups end up struggling to survive, when they should be thriving.

We do better to understand the problem and experiment with different approaches designed to address its causes.

### Challenging Conventional Survival

I do not believe that through rational analysis, methodical organisation and artfulness it is possible to order all aspects of our organisations toward efficiency and control, leaving nothing to chance. Nor do I value or want that possibility, if indeed it is one. I prefer the uncertainty of spontaneity. We are humans, not machines and when any bunch of us gets together for collective endeavour, interesting and unpredictable things will always happen, no matter what efforts are made to tame chaos and eliminate random events.

However, I do believe and have experienced that more of the desirable effects are possible than is usual and it's worth making the effort to try for them. I prefer *thrival* to survival.

The improvement of whatever your group is established to do is territory I know either very little or nothing about. You'll need your own map for that, a well-planned and carefully-monitored plan detailing the usual pre-requisites: the group purpose and intentions, philosophy, structure, roles and responsibilities; requirements of key stakeholders; the intended market or customers; performance targets and strategies to ensure conditions are fit for these intentions and the delivery of products or services.

Those matters deal with an organisation's *Primary Task*, what it must do in order to *survive*; operational stuff that is not my focus. At least, not directly.

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<sup>1</sup> Some researchers have estimated that in large organisations, 60 - 80% or more of the energy represented by their human potential may be routinely wasted.

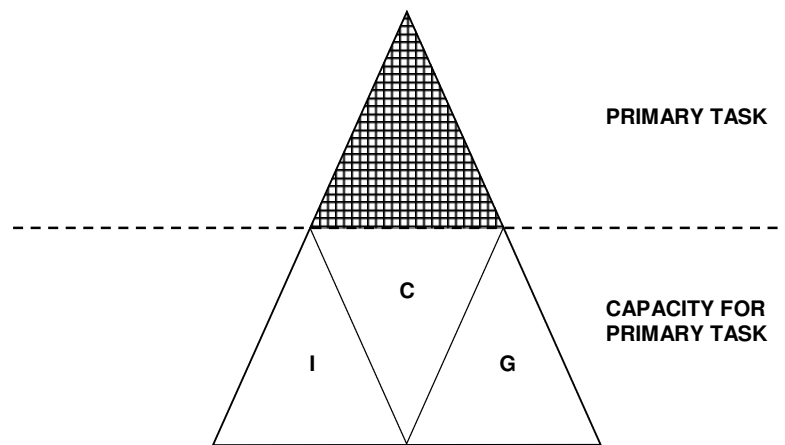
## **Primary Task and Capacity for Primary Task**

In every organisation, team and group there are major opportunities for small-step improvements to performance, results and capacity for thriving. Most of them are very simple to make but are routinely missed. Potential for effectiveness is consequently lost.

The evidence is found in the frequent presence of unresolved and recurring problems, inertia, indecision, confusion, misdirected efforts, mistrust, hostility, cynicism, low morale, disengagement, factionalism, inflexibility and passive resistance.

There are two basic reasons why, even with such serious consequences, these improvement opportunities are not seen or not taken:

- 1 The existence of inappropriate, inconsistent and improvisational processes for managing Primary Task (what the organisation must do in order to remain in business) and the development of capacity for Primary Task:
- 2 Over-attention to the organisation's Primary Task at the expense of developing both individual and collective capacity for the Primary Task:



**I** = DEVELOPMENT OF INDIVIDUALS

**G** = DEVELOPMENT OF GROUP, TEAM & RELATIONSHIP PRACTICES, SYSTEMS & PROCESSES, CULTURE

**C** = CONSTANT MONITORING, CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT (OF ALL THREE AREAS)

Of course, *perfect* functioning, *complete* efficiency and effectiveness would amount to and require a major modern-day miracle. Our organisations and workplace behaviours are as they are because of structural and systemic imperfections designed into them and perpetuated by our social history over hundreds of years, and because of the habituated perceptions, behaviours and expectations of individual participants. Changing all of those interlocking pieces of the puzzle would require a combination of commitment, flair, creativity and powerful magic I have yet to find anywhere.

## **Uncommonly-Practised Commonsense**

However, many people have studied these matters and helped organisations harvest the rewards of useful changes. They have been most useful and produced most progress when well-planned, managed, monitored, and inspired by far-sighted leadership with bold aspirations. Very often, as I said earlier, they involve implementing very simple, small-step improvements.

My own studies over 30 years have led to a belief that much of what is required to bring about thriving workplaces is encouragement to make what is simple common sense, common practice. Although it may be wise to introduce greater sophistication eventually, much can be gained in the meantime from introducing greater common sense - and careful planning to ensure it becomes and remains common practice.

What surprises me is how rare this approach is. What most surprise my clients is how much commitment and effort it takes to make it everyday practice, and how significant are the improvements that result from even its slightest application.

I encourage you to find whatever alignment or differences exist between your perspective and mine and if you disagree, to clarify exactly what are your foundational beliefs and values about groups, teams and organisations. Whatever they are and however much clarity we have about them, they are the basis of the way we see the organisational world and act within it.

### **Illustrations: A Context for This Work**

These are illustrations from my recent organisational client work. In each case, the presenting problem (issues presented in the initial request for support) bore little resemblance to what is described here; these summaries are of what was found, after some simple research, to lie behind the presenting problems. The trigger-point for appeal to my business for external support was either the occurrence or threat of some damaging crisis or *Almighty Catastrophe*.

Each situation depicts an organisation that was *surviving* but not actually *thriving*. To varying degrees, key members in each of them were experiencing anxiety, confusion, stress and insecurity. Increasing non-cooperative competition and creeping cynicism was noticeable. If sustained for long enough, these conditions could be safely predicted to transform into further frustration, anger, apathy, boredom and disengagement. Even more energy from the metaphoric reservoir would disappear down the metaphoric drain.

- 1 A small high-tech development group has gradually run out of willingness to be led by the CEO. For the past year she's buried herself in a solo effort on her pet project or in meetings with the Board. Although well-liked she inspires little confidence now, as others experience how little is her practical interest in supporting and developing the team. When she recently hosted VIPs on a tour of the facilities without formally introducing them, team members were incensed at this display of disrespect and division.
- 2 A large organisation providing professional services has been re-structured five times in the past 14 years. Following its most recent reorganisation some months ago, the signs are once again "promising" but it is still under-performing and in crisis. A new executive team has a different approach from its predecessor. Although relatively clear about changes to the scope of their responsibilities, senior managers are anxious, stressed and confused about what other differences are required of them. Some would like to be enthused but are struggling to suspend disbelief; some are sceptical, others mistrustful and cynical. The CEO, frustrated with some senior managers' performance and impatient for improvement, has begun to take over some aspects of their accountabilities to make sure they are *done right*.
- 3 Since start-up a year ago, most members of a service industry leadership team have found it difficult to accommodate one of their members. A highly-skilled professional, this person advocates philosophically different approaches and outcomes, behaving towards clients in ways that are far outside others' interpretation of the *Primary Purpose*. No-one has yet found the courage to confront him about the considerable difficulties this creates. As yet there is little collective clarity about the organisation's official philosophy, though many assumptions have been made about it. Policies and procedures clarified so far, relate only to routine aspects of dealing with the organisation's external clients.

- 4 The Board of a small service organisation is preparing for a new strategic planning round. The last was carried out three years ago but outcomes have never seriously influenced organisation direction or practice. Boundaries between matters of governance and operating have become acutely blurred and confused. The CEO is intensely frustrated by Board members' interference in his duties. Board members don't understand why their efforts to support what they perceive as an overly-challenged CEO are unwelcome, and are often unaware that they are. The parties are not able to constructively discuss the problems, their differences and their causes.
  
- 5 A successful manufacturing group has modernised and expanded considerably. Some new mid-level managers are disliked by long-term staff because they have insisted on innovation and greater accountability. Complaints about them are taken direct to senior management, who then report concerns to those complained about, sometimes adding "*You should manage your team more effectively.*" Neither the managers nor the CEO measure their performance by seeking methodical feedback from those they lead and manage. There is no common or consistent approach to either leadership or management.

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Tom Watkins