

Dysfunctional?

I don't know where it started and I don't know where it will end. Our society seems to have fallen into a curious mindset. We see the world on a scale ranging from functional to dysfunctional, and we work hard to fix all the dysfunctional bits.

We characterize what otherwise might be seen as different or unexpected, with stunningly disturbing results. I've been thinking, maybe the root of all this dysfunction is the label we so casually assign to it.

I dedicate this issue of Compass to the notion that the world we experience might not be broken, but is functioning well, perhaps perfectly. Our chief difficulty might be to better cope with the world as it is, and not our inability to make it into what we prefer it to be.

I read yet another glowing self-description of yet another new, improved means for creating, if not Heaven on Earth, Heaven on a project, and I burp, barely able to keep down my lunch. Especially when I review what this latest self-promoter considers heavenly, and recognize it as a description of one circle of my own, personal Hell.

We could do better than fail to seduce each other into pursuing some unachievable Utopia. We might, if we could get over the tenacious idea that we have something to get over, find little bits of an unexpected Heaven right where we are.

If these propositions seem dysfunctional to you, set aside this newsletter now. It ain't gonna get any easier for you once you see what's inside.

D. Schmaltz

What's Inside

Wellness.....	1
The Universal Complications of Organizational Life.....	2
The Autistic Organization?.....	3
Why Autistic?.....	3
The Raging Normals.....	5
Is Your Effort In Trouble?.....	5
Mastering Projects.....	6



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Wellness

Everyone gets colds, but few agree on the proper treatment. The old, unreliable remedies live on, though some heavily-touted breakthrough appears every year. Anti-bacterial hand gel. Zinc lozenges. Last year, a friend introduced me to a Vietnamese ginger-lime concoction that really worked for me, so I've been recommending it to all of my friends. I was surprised to learn that it didn't work for everyone else!

In the same way that everyone has the common cold, everyone has projects that don't seem to work right. Few agree on the proper treatment. Another heavily-touted method appears each year, attracting its share of converts. Lean. eXtreme. Agile.

I try to not take my colds personally, but we live in a self-help society. I can't help but feel responsible for catching cold, even though I'm probably not to blame. But explaining how I caught a cold—I was usually burning the candle at both ends—doesn't help. I can catch cold without even striking a match, let alone burning any candles! By the time I've caught a cold, the cold has me, and I'd have to change the past to keep it from running its normal course.

My doctor always prescribes the same treatment for my common colds, even though, when I get them, they feel anything but common. He prescribes a couple of days of bed rest supplemented with the proverbial "plenty of fluids." But I don't want a couple of days of bed rest! I don't feel THAT sick! I can't comply. Besides, don't colds usually arrive when we're booked solid for the coming month and cannot call in sick?

Projects seem to be like this, too. Whatever the difficulty, it appears at an inconvenient time. I know what

Doctors know that ninety percent of all sickness eventually cures itself, whatever the treatment. I think the same holds true for organizations and projects.



I should have done, but doing that, then, is impossible. I can't fix the past. So I stock up on the project equivalent of Kleenex, perhaps brew up something not at all unlike a Vietnamese ginger-lime concoction to reassure myself that I'm chasing it away, and continue. I cough and sneeze my way through, grumpy and fuzzy headed. Later, I might sing the praises of whatever miraculous cure I stumbled upon without ever acknowledging that my cold probably cured itself.

Continued on the next page

WELLNESS (CONTINUED)

Doctors know that ninety percent of all sickness eventually cures itself, whatever the treatment. I think the same holds true for projects. Most encounter unexpected difficulties, and many unknowingly benefit from the unintended consequences of their temporary incapacitation. None of them, no matter how well planned or professionally managed, know what it would have been like had they not fallen ill. Instead, they either swear by whatever cure seemed to work last time when their project was curing itself or adopt the latest, greatest new cure.

The truth about common colds is the same as the truth about project difficulties. They come when they come. No one's to blame. They go when they go. None of the remedies help or hinder much.

The chief difficulty is the same with bad projects as with common colds. We believe we're inoculated against them (even though there is no cold-preventing vaccine or way to avoid the universal complications of organizational life - see sidebar). They both arrive at inconvenient times, so we are ill-prepared to accept them. Then, we expend energy trying to treat them, forgetting that there is no cure, and, when the cold or project complication finally leaves, we actually feel as though we've done something to chase it away.

“The problem isn't as much of a problem as how we cope with it becomes.”

The problem isn't as much of a problem as how we cope with it becomes.

The alternative, to simply accept things as they are, seems cynical. It feels inhuman to deliberately forego trying to fix something so obviously broken, even though, however we respond, the problem almost always fixes itself.

Some projects seem to be able to actually prolong the effects of even the slightest cold. This is the equivalent of what aviators call “pilot-induced oscillation.” Airplanes, like projects, are mostly capable of flying themselves. They are engineered for flight. Unlike what my intuition tells me as a passenger, turbulence is rarely any real threat to continued flight. How the pilot responds to turbulence, however, can materially influence whether a plane stays airborne.

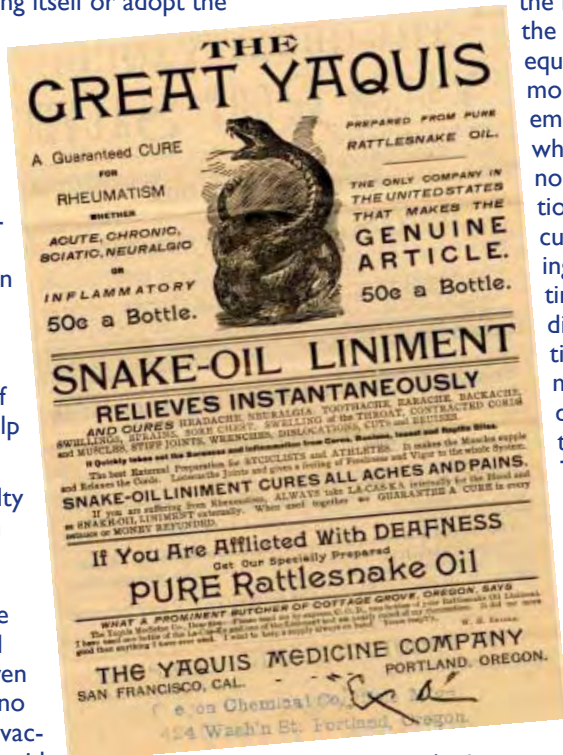
When a project gets a common cold, the usual response includes increasing the interaction among the participants—the equivalent of taking more fluids. We call emergency meetings where different than normal conversations occur. The focus shifts from staying on track to getting back on track, disrupting the routine rhythm. But many projects don't get back on track as a result!

They discover a different track to the same destination or an even better destination! Neither of these outcomes are anticipated before the common cold arrives. And no original plan predicted the onset of sniffles.

MAKING THINGS WORSE

Some projects become seriously ill, and, as if they were just suffering from the common cold, treat themselves with the same folk remedies or whiz-bang products. These unfortunate projects rarely heal themselves, but usually self-prescribe even more ineffective remedy anyway. These cures make the disease worse, but the supposed curative regimen becomes imperative. As sniffles evolve into nose bleeds and nose bleeds into periodic blackouts, we brew even more Vietnamese ginger lime tea.

Most projects seeking professional help suffer from nothing more troubling than a common cold. Some specialists will diagnose slow death, no matter what the symptoms. Who's to blame? Some



Continued on page 6

The Universal Complications of Organizational Life

The bitterest medicine is the prescription we later discover had no affect at all.

When we look at project difficulties as if they were illnesses, it seems reasonable to search for the germ causing it. Here are some germs commonly thought to afflict projects.

- Fear
- Mistakes
- Can't predict the future
- Scarce resources
- Changing minds
- Difficulty speaking up
- Imperfect vision
- Selective memory
- Diverse preferences
- Competitiveness

Snake oil salesmen sell remedies for these universal complications. Unfortunately the attempts to inoculate against these annoying features of human experience deliver universally disappointing results.

When the 'expert' promises productivity by ridding your workplace of fear, be wary. Each of us is sometimes afraid and we get over, around, or somehow past it. Until the next time. Courageous engagement is not about the absence of fear but about action in the face of it.

We make mistakes. To err is human — the foundation for learning and discovery. If success demands perfection, it mandates failure.

Complications swirl. True agility and innovation isn't found in eliminating complications, but by learning to accept them, and cope with their periodic, usually inconveniencing, influence.

The choice is between thriving and endlessly, failing to fix these features, distracting yourself from the real work at hand.

The worse-prepared believe themselves inoculated against the inevitable. Whether that inoculation takes the form of a method or a medicine, we each ultimately discover that we can, must, and will heal ourselves.

This is wellness.

The Autistic Organization?

"The things about others that drive us crazy are the things that are keeping them sane."

Eugene Kennedy

Shortly after I submitted an article entitled *The Autistic Organization* to the *Projects@Work* e-zine, editor Aaron Smith replied. "I find a major potential problem with the autism angle."

He went on, "Bells went off and only became louder as soon as I read this a second time. I am not part of any PC force, and you know from other potentially controversial pieces that I have run, some by you, that I'm not opposed to shaking things up a bit. But in this case, I am questioning the suitability of the autistic organization as a metaphor. I'm not a subject matter expert, but I, too, have friends whose lives are immersed in this area, including an aunt who is an award-winning teacher of autistic children. I have only informally surveyed two people about this article. They both felt it was dangerous territory."

I responded more graciously than I felt and reworked the piece to exclude any suggestion of autism. Seething a bit inside.

I knew I was learning something because I seethe when I learn.

A few weeks before submitting the article, I awoke to an NPR interview with Temple Grandin. Grandin is autistic, but unlike many autistic people, she's learned to communicate with the rest of the world. She writes. She even teaches in a university.

Grandin was explaining how she thinks. (hear the interview here: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5628476>) She claimed to have no ability to abstract from the specific. So, when someone mentions an abstract concept, like love, she performs what she referred to as a Google Image Search® in her head. This search might return the picture of a mare and her foal. Or Herbie the Love Bug.

She says that for her, memory is specific. She has no sense of cow except for a specific picture of a cow. Her memory is also serial, like a video. She possesses a near photographic memory, but she stores images serially and has to fast forward to the specific point in the stream before remembering.

Her story moved me. And thoroughly intrigued me. Here was someone that by most measures of capability, should not be able to bridge into the world that I experience. She, it seemed to me, had become a master of her world and perhaps a master of my world, too. This interview inspired me to write *The Autistic Organization* piece, but I'd failed to build that bridge between me and my editor's world.

Months earlier, over dinner with our friends Tony and Wendy, we'd heard the story of their struggles to integrate an autistic son into their family. They were better prepared than most, since Tony is a family therapist, but they complained about their local council refusing their request to enroll their son in a program they believed in.

Amy and I were consulting with an organization that, as the conversation progressed, came to resemble the autism that Tony and Wendy described. On the walk back to the hotel, we reconsidered our engagement. Were we working with an Autistic Organization?

We had no trouble seeing our client as autistic. The organization seemed to exhibit the characteristic behaviors (see side-bar). Further, this perspective elicited our empathy—and empathy is an essential ingredient in our consulting engagements.

Taking a cue from Tony and Wendy, we engaged to understand more than to reform. We focused upon building bridges between what seemed like alien world views.

The engagement was successful. We think it was successful because we decided not to reform the client. They were suspicious at first, as

they'd seen many consultants try to reform them. We called their eccentricities "features," and helped them bridge their different world views.

Were they really any different when we left? They were even more aware of what they'd started out as. But more importantly, they'd built a bridge or two without insisting that anyone change anything. This, of



Why Autistic?

What led us to see the organization as autistic? We've turned to an expert resource for a description. Do you see any reflections of your own organization's behaviors inside the following frame? (emphasis added)*

- Individuals with autism experience **difficulty in verbal and/or nonverbal communication**, which ranges in extremes from not speaking at all to being unable to interpret body language or to participate comfortably in two-way conversation.
- People with autism exhibit **rigidity in thought processes**, which can include difficulty with learning abstract concepts, generalizing information, and tolerating changes in routines and/or environments.
- The most outstanding hallmark of autism is **difficulty with reciprocal social interaction**. This can range from appearing to want social isolation to experiencing social awkwardness in attaining and maintaining ongoing relationships."

* From: http://www.maapservices.org/MAAP_Sub_Find_It_-_About_Autism_Aspengers.htm

The Autistic Organization continued

course, changed nothing but left them feeling confident that they could constructively bridge any difference.

Isn't it interesting how transformation so often rests upon the complete acceptance of just who we are? But this organization was not autistic, except through our eyes. We each seem to need to categorize to understand, even when our categorizing inhibits real understanding. I suppose that if we'd talked about influenza with Tony and Wendy, our client would have seemed fluey. I'm certain that some useful insight would have emerged from even that frame of reference.

Later, I wrote the article and received the rejection. Even later than that, considering this issue of Compass, Amy and I both agreed that The Autistic Organization should be a centerpiece. So, we drafted the newsletter and sent it out to Tony and Wendy and another friend for review.

The feedback was surprisingly emotional. What we saw as a fairly straightforward exposition elicited anger and tears in our dear friends. Bells went off. We were not yet done learning. We finally decided that we had been digging a rat hole. If our purpose was to communicate, we were clearly failing. Our purpose was certainly not to elicit anger or tears, but we were not, and could not be, in control of that. Unless



we pulled the article. We decided to pull the article. It wasn't bridging anything.

We are all learning, sometimes seething. The frames of reference I use to grok a situation are probably different than the frames of reference you use. Our success is never tied to the frame of reference we use, but to how we use that frame of reference. Another consultant, adopting our Autistic Organization frame, could have experienced quite different insights. She might have even concluded that this frame was clear evidence of the need to initiate reform.

PULLING THE FUNCTIONAL OUT OF DYSFUNCTIONAL

When we remember that our frames of reference are information, not definition, we can have some fun and find some functionality. Our window to the world is not the world. When we remember that there's more out there than what we can ever see from in here, we might peer through our frame and see ourselves looking back from the other side.

*"We see the world as we are,
not as it is." Barry Oshrey*

In my career as a project manager, I learned (perhaps I should say that I am still learning . . . and seething) that the frames of reference I use hold powerful influence over my ability to create results. When my results are disappointing, I'm learning to look through a different window first. Why? Well, shifting my frame of reference is usually easier than changing anything else. So, until I've exhausted my alternate perspectives, I can avoid a lot of difficult work by simply shifting my frame. Also, looking through a different window inevitably elicits new perspectives—insights—which can immediately resolve the disappointment. No lag time. Immediate results.

I see dysfunction, too. We all do. What we do when we see dysfunction makes a very large small difference. You see, the dysfunction is not in the organization. Nor is it in the people working there. It is first in the window frame we so often unconsciously choose to look through when peering into an organization. Just becoming aware of the window as a win-

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down and our unconscious choice as a choice can transform everything.

When we take in information as if it defines something, all kinds of work seems necessary. When we consider this information as a point of reference, we can see something we never expected to find lurking there—an insight bridging the gap between obvious dysfunction and surprisingly solid functionality.

A few months after that dinner with Tony and Wendy, we exchanged emails. I learned that they had chosen to accept the council's decision about their son. But rather than consider themselves doomed to dysfunction, they chose to look at the situation through a different window. You see, their son's challenge is really no different than anyone else's. He can use the wrong school to learn how to cope with a world unable to bridge gaps. The gaps won't go away, but his inability to bridge them for himself might.

Everyone faces the same challenge. Our function is exactly the same. We are each employed to build bridges between personally unimaginable worlds. That these gaps so often seem dysfunctional needn't inhibit anyone's ability to build truly functional bridges over them.





The Raging Normals or Deep Dysfunction?

Is Your Effort In Trouble?

Can you tell if your effort is in real trouble? Assess the current state of your project or initiative against the following list. Do you need to call for help?

- The effort is well underway and there is no clear agreement about the mission, objectives or goals.
- Communication among team members and with key community members seems inadequate—team performance is suffering.
- Community members are overly critical of one another and/or the leader.
- There seems to be no common approach to decision making or problem solving.
- The initiative is well underway and team members do not have clarity or agreement about their roles, responsibilities, and levels of authority.
- There seems to be a high level of boredom or tension at meetings.
- Community members are overly dependent on the leader for direction, task accomplishment, and decision making.
- Decision making appears to be a black-box monopoly held by only a few.
- Team members feel that their efforts are unrecognized, unappreciated, or rewarded unfairly.
- The same issues pop up continually, and the same mistakes are made over and over.
- The effort feels out of sync with the rest of the organization; there is a sense of futility or powerlessness to change things.

When you're managing a project, leading a business initiative, or handling every-day operations, isn't it difficult to distinguish between a common cold and slow death?

Give us a call — we'll consider it a privilege to help.

If 90% of all issues are capable of healing themselves, that leaves 10% needing attention. No one can afford the cost of treating every snuffle like a life-threatening condition.

If most 'problems' are simply normal complications, how can you distinguish deep dysfunction from the 'raging normals'?

WIND YOUR WATCH

WWII Navy fighters had a watch embedded in the steering column. The first step in every procedure was "wind the watch". The first step in every emergency procedure was also "wind the watch." Why? Focusing on something that won't make the problem worse helps avoid the pilot induced oscillation that can shift a normal incident into a death spiral. When you feel like you are in the midst of a crisis, wind your watch first.



As you take that deep breath, consider your effort. Where is it now, really? Where is it heading? Remember, feeling good isn't the same thing as doing well, and feeling badly is not the same thing as being ill. If you're are on a roller-coaster project, it is only normal to have a queasy stomach.

Are your personal standards for success conflicting with the current state? If you are making overall progress against your broader goals, the dysfunction you feel may not be a real problem. Are these the normal meanderings common to any exploration? Are you storming normally?

Separate what you'd like to happen from what your project really needs. Just because you'd like everyone to "be nice" and get along doesn't make the passionate engagement between divergent opinions in constructive conflict a dysfunction.

Wanting every step in the cake making process to be as neat and tidy as the finished product can make this interim mess offensive to your delicate sensitivities. This doesn't mean there is anything wrong. Maybe something wonderful is cooking!

LOOK TO THE PAST

Looking at your organization's past efforts can help assess your real progress. More experienced hands can fill you in on the story of how earlier efforts unfolded, rough spots and all. Notice major cycles and recurring patterns. Identify how your situation is similar. If your effort is trending in the same direction as prior unsuccessful endeavors, note this information. How might you re-frame your effort to better mirror past successes? If you can't, what does the past suggest for a viable strategy now?

ENGAGE A FAIR WITNESS

In the middle of a mess, despite your best efforts, it is normal to have difficulty gaining an objective perspective. This is when finding a fair witness, a trusted advisor with outside perspective, can be most valuable. It is also when you are most vulnerable to a diagnosis that benefits the outsider more than it helps your organization. With experts eager to convince you that your sniffles are symptoms of a serious dysfunction for which only they hold the cure, how do you keep from falling prey while getting the help you really need?

Look for someone with experience in similar situations, someone you personally trust who has no skin in the game. Ask people you trust for references. Ask about biases up front. Don't trust an advisor who asserts their complete objectivity. No human alive can live up to that claim. Fair witnesses will be forthright about their biases.

If the recommendations include long-term involvement, get a second opinion. If anyone promises Utopian outcomes with no downsides, hang on to your wallet and keep looking.

A fair witness will help you learn from your situation. They will ask provocative questions that push your thinking instead of providing pat answers and 'all-ya-gotta-do' solutions. Fair witnesses generate insight and understanding to inoculate you from over-reacting to your organization's raging normal wellness while preparing you to weather your potentially rougher road to recovery from any deeper dysfunction.

WELLNESS (CONTINUED)

specialists are like hammers looking for nails. Some projects find comfort in looking like nails and receiving reassuring whacks on the head.

PROJECT WELLNESS

Wellness is not about preventing or curing disease, but promoting health. Health is more than the absence of sneezing, but includes some occasional chills and fever. Few projects schedule regular checkups with wellness specialists. They might submit to periodic performance audits, which do no more than confirm that they are sick. Few submit to the simple examination that could tell them they are well until after performance has been suffering for some time. Just the presence of a specialist can get people believing they are sicker than they really are. Real illness, like Sandburg's fog, enters on little cat's feet. And wellness doesn't always feel so good.

Everyone complains about the weather, but no one is trying to fix it. Weather comes and weather goes regardless of any rainmaker's intervention. Unlike the weather, though, everyone complains about projects—and almost everyone seems to be trying to fix them.

True North isn't.

We believe that projects are mostly capable of healing themselves. Most are healthier than they imagine when surrounded by the normal aches and pains accompanying the birth of anything. If you invite a diet doctor into a delivery room, don't be surprised if he seems most concerned about the mother's circumference.

It's too easy, when reading the trades, to believe that your project could operate like some self-described Nirvana project, and that in the shadow cast by that fiction, your project must be really sick. And that some specialist could cure you. The tariff on imported methodologies is always higher than the cost of discovering your own wellness, but no specialist will ever tell you that.

We will.

It's reassuring to note that projects still succeed at about the same rate they succeeded a century ago. All of the innovations introduced to cure projects' common colds have resulted in a nearly 100% cure rate after a few days of disrupted rhythm and more deliberate fluid consumption. Completed projects inevitably leave behind more used Kleenex than

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expected, believe themselves particularly smart for having overcome their illness, retain the belief that their latest and greatest cure actually worked, and rarely recognize the remarkable means by which they really managed to cure themselves.

About Compass

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**Working well together
to create exceptional results
Building on our best selves
Dealing with the world
as it is.**

