Force-Field Analysis—Part 2

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2005, published in the Houston Home Journal on Tuesday, March 29, 2005

Last week, I began a description of this decision-making tool, originally developed by Kurt Lewin, social psychologist. If you missed that column, please check my website, buildingfutureleaders.com.

Let's look today at a new example. Imagine you are considering installing a leadership development process for your organization. If you read this column often, you know that I am a very strong advocate of this very worthwhile initiative.

On a piece of paper, create a large capital "T". Label at the top of the "T" on the left the words "Reasons to create a leadership development process." On the right, label the column "Reasons to stay as we are."

The vertical line on the page is like the line of scrimmage in a football game. All the reasons we generate in the left column are "driving forces," those that are pushing for the change. All the reasons we list on the right are those that are "restraining forces." (This is the source of the name of this process; you are analyzing the various forces in this field of play.)

Sometimes people assign a weighting to each force, using a scale of 1 to 5 for example. There are some issues where this may be valuable. However, I've found that artificially attempting a mathematical analysis is rarely helpful. People and their unpredictable emotions and vagaries will be involved, so generating an artificial algorithm will likely be of little value.

The value of this tool is that it allows you to openly identify all the competing forces. Once you have some initial thoughts captured, you can invite others to offer additional thoughts. It's a wonderful way to obtain buy-in from the rest of your organization. With your organization currently not moving in one direction or the other, the driving forces and restraining forces are obviously in a state of equilibrium.

If you are serious about considering the change, you can use your awareness of these competing forces to determine appropriate action. Your initial thought may be to consider how you can strengthen the driving forces.

However, often you'll find that creatively considering how to minimize or eliminate the restraining forces will be more effective. It's similar to driving down the highway with one foot on the accelerator and the other foot on the brake.

You can probably increase your speed a little bit by pressing harder on the accelerator. When you do, you'll not only consume greater quantities of gasoline, you'll also increase the rate at which you wear out the brakes!

If you release your foot off the brake instead, you'll reduce the wear on the brakes and increase the speed of the automobile at the same time. That's a much more effective approach. In analyzing a force-field, you'll find that reducing the restraining forces usually consumes fewer resources and contributes significantly to moving toward the desired change.

In our example of implementing a leadership development process, maybe a restraining force is that the top leaders don't know how to serve as mentors. Implementing a test process in a single department, training just a few key leaders, might be a cost-effective introduction.

Try a force-field analysis using your own proposed change. Describe as many driving forces and restraining forces as you can at your initial sitting. Then let the document lie fallow for awhile. You'll be astounded at how additional ideas will offer themselves, especially when you open it up to others.

Examining a complex proposal with a force-field analysis allows others to participate in the problem resolution. Creative contribution to the analysis begins the enrolling process. Executing any kind of effort will be much easier if you will involve the people who will be making the change. You'll find that you have to hold people back from taking action—they will be chomping at the bit to make the identified improvements!