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AN INTERVIEW WITH ROGER KAUFMAN: MEGA THINKING AND PLANNING IN THE BUSINESS/INDUSTRY WORLD*

MICHAEL F. SHAUGHNESSY[†]

Eastern New Mexico University, United States

Roger Kaufman is professor emeritus, Florida State University, Director of Roger Kaufman & Associates, and Distinguished Research Professor at the Sonora Institute of Technology (Mexico). He received ASTD's Distinguished Contribution to Workplace Learning and Performance award. Also, he is a past president, honorary member for life and Thomas Gilbert Award winner, all with ISPI, Kaufman has published 41 books and over 280 articles on strategic planning, performance improvement, quality management and continual improvement, needs assessment, management, and evaluation. He consults world-wide with public, private and NGO organizations. At Florida State he created the Center for Needs Assessment and Planning that did applied research and development. The literature often sites him as "the father of needs assessment." He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and the American Educational Research Association.

Shaughnessy:

Roger, you and a few of your colleagues have collaborated on a series of books on "mega thinking and planning". First of all, how did this come about?

Kaufman:

I have long been impressed with the contributions Bob Mager has made in our field especially targeted on individual performance. Inspired by this (and I wish whoever holds the copyrights on his 'six pack' would release them) I thought it would be a good idea to move the dialog up to a system (not systems) level and prepare six books on overall organizational performance based on Mega where the primary client and beneficiary was society. I got five other authors committed and HRD Press published this series.

Shaughnessy:

Now can you brief us on some of your colleagues and their respective contributions?

Kaufman:

Dale Brethower is the expert in performance accomplishment and his observation that if you are not adding societal value you are subtracting value. Richard Gerson is an expert on personal improvement, Ryan Watkins on performance system design and development, Bob Carleton on organizational improvement and Ingrid Guerra-Lopez on evaluation and continual improvement. All prepared their books as both stand-alone and linking all together with the common referent of Mega.

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[†] Corresponding author Email: michael.Shaughnessy@enmu.edu

Shaughnessy:

Let's start with the "six critical success factors for successful mega thinking and planning". What are they and how did they come about or originate.

Kaufman:

The Six Critical Success factors were prepared when I noted that the conventional way of dealing the "success factors" was too focus on one's organization and did not take into account external clients and society. So, the six factors are written for success at Mega-level strategic thinking and planning. They are:

1. Don't assume that what worked in the past will work now or in the future.
2. Differentiate between ends (what) and means (how)
3. Prepare all objectives—including the Ideal Vision and mission—to include measurable statements of both where you are headed as well as the criteria for measuring when you have arrived
4. Define "need" as a gap in results (not as insufficient levels of resources, means, or methods)
5. Use and align all three levels of planning and results: Mega/Outcomes, Macro/Outputs, Micro/Products
6. Use an Ideal Vision (Mega: what kind of world, in measurable performance terms, we want for tomorrow's child) as the underlying basis for planning and continual improvement

Shaughnessy:

Change, choices and consequences- why is it important to juxtapose these three domains, and why are they relevant?

Kaufman:

These three are what faces everyone, including educational technologists. Change is everywhere, and that leads us to choices we can make--as masters of change or victims of change. And all of this has consequences relative to our survival and possible thriving as a society.

Shaughnessy:

What are three "basic concepts and tools for Mega thinking and planning"?

Kaufman:

They are (1) the Three Critical Success Factors, (2) the Organizational Elements Model (OEM) that ask and answer the basic questions any organization faces, and (3) a six-step process for identifying and resolving problems

Shaughnessy:

Needs and wants, and hard and soft data- why is it important to differentiate between these?

Kaufman:

Needs are gaps in results, while wants are preferred way to respond to problems. Hard data are empirical performance results and consequences while Soft data are perceptions about conditions. All are required for practical strategic thinking and planning, though how you use each can be quite different. While decisions should be guided, for example, by needs defined with hard data; you do not want to discount people perceptions of their needs or you could have a very difficult time changing behavior.

Shaughnessy:

We are living in "new times" and dealing with "new concepts" and new realities (economic, political) Why are each of these areas important?

Kaufman:

Our world is changing and changeable. If we ONLY attempt to apply solutions and concepts that worked previously we will most often fail. One of the books in this series is by Ryan Watkins and it addresses "Performance by Design". What do you see as the main contributions of this book? It picks up where others stop by relating what our field knows and is able to do to a Mega focus -- and that is missing from virtually all other approaches. At the same time, it focuses on the pivotal role that needs assessments play in aligning results with the numerous alternative activities and technologies we have to choose from.

Shaughnessy:

I like Watkins' emphasis on "continual improvement" but he focuses on formative evaluation (as many in the field do)- but does he clearly indicate what to do what the results of this "formative evaluation"?

Kaufman:

Formative evaluation is simply comparing actual results with your performance objectives while any program is on-going. By comparing gaps between What Is and What Should be as one progresses through design, development, and implementation this allows changes to be made en route. You don't have to go blindly through an intervention and create a disaster before revising as required, and this is brought out with his performance design approach.

Shaughnessy:

Why is Watkins' book an important contribution to this six book series? And why did you ask him to write on this particular topic?

Kaufman:

Watkins is both a professor and practitioner so he has the perspective to guide others to success using basic concepts and tools in Mega thinking and planning. His is the only such book that links to Mega.

Shaughnessy:

Let's turn now to performance--knowing what to do and how to do it. Dale Brethower has written on this topic from a systems perspective. Can you discuss your views (and his) on systems analysis, and the systems" thinking lens"?

Kaufman:

A system approach links everything to societal value-added while a systems approach looks at one of the parts. This perspective will allow people to avoid the popular and conventional wisdom that has led to so many bankruptcies around the world. If an organization doesn't take a Mega view it will likely fail or falter.

Shaughnessy:

Taking the systems perspective one step further- what does he mean in terms of doing a systems analysis of a business and a family?

Kaufman:

A systems analysis is based on a needs assessment...it (a) identifies the detailed requirements and characteristics of the gaps identified. (b) identifies possible alternative ways and means to close those gaps, and (c) provides criteria for making decisions about how to proceed. It takes a results-oriented and data-oriented approach.

Shaughnessy:

Let's try to specify what "improvement" means and dissect quality, quantity, and other factors.

Kaufman:

Improvement is close the gaps between current results and desired results--ideally at the Mega, Macro, and Micro levels. Thanks for asking this one, because it is usually dealt with incompletely. Actually, we recommend that one shoots at perfection (recall Lexus' ad "a relentless drive toward perfection").

Shaughnessy:

Why is it important, in Brethower's mind to "finding out what will work, and with whom"? And can you give us a few interventions from his text?

Kaufman:

There is much research on what works and what doesn't. Perhaps the best scientific work on this at the individual performance level is being done by Dick Clark at U. Southern California. Organizational interventions that work are increasingly well documented (many by Mariano Bernardez) including Refinor in Argentina, several organizations in Sonora Mexico, among others.

Shaughnessy:

Past - present and future- how do we need to examine these time frames and connect them to interventions?

Kaufman:

We live in the present based on what has happened in the past. If we are smart we create the future we want for tomorrow's child. A good inspiration comes from Mahatma Gandhi: "Be the change you wish to see in the world"!

Shaughnessy:

Gerson's book on "achieving High Performance" seems to take Brethower's work one step further-but his focus is on motivation—motivating self, and perhaps more importantly, motivating others. How big a task is this in these two realms?

Kaufman:

It is both big and required. People will determine if something happens or not, so we have to deal with both people and the organizational culture.

Shaughnessy:

How does one go about creating the proper motivational environment- is it climate, concern, camaraderie?

Kaufman:

It is all of these and also that everyone in the organization commits to go to the same place and thus those three elements are key. Fortunately, people agree on the type of world they want for tomorrow's child, where we find disagreement is usually over the "how" rather than "what" in terms of achieving those desired results.

Shaughnessy:

I think we would all like to reach "The Top" to use Gerson's phrase but maintaining it, day in and day out is tough. Any insights into this matter?

Kaufman:

As noted in Carleton's book, it all depends on finding the right incentives. If you don't get cooperation in maintaining it, you get the usual corporate malaise we deal with every day in most organizations.

Have you called a help-line recently?

Shaughnessy:

Robert Carleton in his text attempts to tie this all together in his writings on the implementation and management of performance improvement plans. Let's talk change management, and then project management - which comes first- the chicken or the egg?

Kaufman:

First, creating the change that is desired and required and then managing projects becomes the avenue. I might add that Carleton's book provides the insight and rationale that change can be both rapid and deep if only one find the right incentives. That is opposite to the conventional wisdom but he makes the case. Each book, connected to Mega, have such practical gems.

Shaughnessy:

Clarity and Ability---are these two sides of the same coin or are they two distinct entities that HAVE need to be carefully, cautiously, critically, and cogently examined?

Kaufman:

I think they are related. First is clarity and what we, together, commit to achieve. And then come ability and sometimes we have to develop the appropriate skills, knowledge, attitudes, and abilities.

Shaughnessy:

We would all like to achieve sustained results. But as you know, time, the economy, and a host of other factors get in the way. What can you tell us or what can Carleton tell us about achieving sustained results?

Kaufman:

It is all about the incentives. And incentives can be both tangible (hygiene factors) and attitudinal (motivators). It is all very sensible.

Shaughnessy:

At the end of the day, at the end of the week, month and year, most of us tend to stop and evaluate our impact, or the impact of the company or organization. Ingrid Guerra-Lopez has tackled this domain- what did you personally get from her text and what would you like your readers to acquire?

Kaufman:

She relates evaluation with needs assessment and Mega planning, and shows how all three may be sensibly related. Most approaches deal with one or the other, but not all three.

Shaughnessy:

How do good companies and organizations mesh the data and the methods? Qualitative, quantitative or other?

Kaufman:

That is where we think we can help. We show why doing so is important and then how to do just that.

Shaughnessy:

Are there data collection tools that you prefer or suggest? Why?

Kaufman:

We urge that the data collection tools be selected on the types of data required to make good leadership decisions. One-size-fits all barely work for bathrobes and certainly not

in our field. Watkins' new book, "A Guide to Assessing Needs" offers many practical tools, and is available for free online through the World Bank at www.gapsinresults.com. And Ingrid Guerra Lopez is finishing up a needs assessment book as well.

Shaughnessy:

Drawing inferences and making conclusions is part and parcel of the project. How does one go about this in an orderly way or is it simply trial and error or simply hard experience and knowledge?

Kaufman:

If one does Mega think and planning then there is a systematic and systemic path forward that gets developed. Trial-and-terror is a lousy way to proceed especially since it involves real live people who are not disposable nor should be mal-treated. By applying results-driven whole-system approaches to planning and thinking we can do better (much better).

Shaughnessy:

What have I neglected to ask?

Kaufman:

Why people should buy both the books. It is because it provides clear concepts and tools for measurably improving what organizations use, do, produces, deliver and the external impacts. It is different, proven, practical, and ethical. Thanks for doing this review.