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**Four Core Experience Based Conclusions About Life in Organizations  
Roelf Woldring  
First published on the Web in August 2018**

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## **What this is about ...**

I learned something important about myself on a recent weekend. I am less patient with myself now and much less accepting of some of the things others in my society believe about life in organizations.

I don't expect to be seen as being any more "right" in my views now than in my earlier years. I don't expect folks in general to agree with me any more than they did in the past – that is up to them.

But I do find that I am not prepared to engage in as much dialogue about these beliefs with those who see things differently, unless that dialogue leads to real constructive action that benefits both of us.

I have worked for a long time, and am still actively involved with clients, and my own business. Over the course of my career, I have kept up a constant involvement in academic life – as a night student, graduate student, part time lecturer and distance education participant. I have, and still do, read widely in management and workplace psychology. I have thought hard about what I was doing at work and how I was leading the folks who worked for me.

I have come to these four conclusions by reflecting on both the reading and the experience. I have quietly held them for years. They underlie all my consulting work and business writing.

## **The 4 conclusions**

- 1. Performance appraisal is a waste of time if you are looking for business results.**
- 2. Organizations waste the dollars they spend on interpersonal skill training (e.g. programs on leading others, resolving conflict).**
- 3. Interview-based recruiting is all about "good enough" hiring, not future performance excellence on-the-job.**
- 4. Many human abilities are as much instinctive as thoughtful. Excellence at work requires thought rather than just responding instinctively.**

I will expand below. The first, on performance appraisal, follows.

## The First Belief: “Performance Appraisal is a Waste of Time”

Performance appraisal is a waste of time if you are looking for business results.



### My History with Performance Appraisal

Our evolved instinctive approaches to living in tribes makes power-based interpersonal relationships very much part of the way that we work together. We like tribally defined hierarchies. We need leaders and followers. We need to know where we stand in these tribal power structures. Performance appraisal does a fine job of addressing these needs. But it does nothing at all to increase an organization's ability to generate results.

I have personally appraised dozens of direct reports. I have directed the building of innovative computer-based performance appraisal systems. I have led the implementation of such performance appraisal systems in large IT organizations (> 1500 professionals).

But I now accept that very little of my work around performance appraisal contributed to improving the results we delivered in the organizations for which I worked. I now know that backward-looking performance appraisal simply **does not justify the energy it takes to do, and the anxiety and mistrust that it creates in the people who were appraised.**

### Future Looking Performance Contracting - The Better Way

Forward-looking performance contracting is different. Performance contracting means looking ahead, not looking back. It consists of the following steps.

1. Negotiating what an individual will do in the coming months and year.
2. Clarifying how this relates to what others, including the person whom the individual is dependent on, are doing.
3. Agreeing on how the results to be delivered by the individual are going to be measured by both the person and the boss. They each need independent access to the data that makes up the measures;
4. Getting together regularly to review delivered personal results against the agreed upon performance objectives.

Managers who contract for future performance in this way **lead at work**. They inspire. They shape the future through the actions of the people who work for them.

### My Experience with Performance Contracting

It worked for me. I have twice created IT organizations that outside auditors independently judged to be “world class excellent”. In both organizations, I did performance contracting with my direct reports, and encouraged them to do so with the people who worked for them. Together, we supported the cascade of this approach down our organization.

Performance contracting is not easy. The boss must make a personal commitment to **simultaneously treating** the people who work for the boss as problem-solving peers **and** as results-responsible direct reports. Doing so involves accepting and working with the dynamic contradictions between these two roles. As problem-solving peers, the two people share power and a kind of equality. As direct report and boss, they are in a clearly defined power hierarchy. Recognizing and respecting these differences, and dealing with the conflict they create, takes self-awareness and emotional self containment (EQ) on the part of the boss.

Bosses must discipline themselves to continuously clarify when they are behaving as a problem-solving peer and when they are behaving as a results-evaluating superior in their interactions with direct reports. You cannot do both at the same time. You need to create clear organizational rituals which signal when you are in which mode.

### **Power, Taking Responsibility for Communication Breakdown, and Performance Evaluation**

At times, bosses must negate the “power surge” that comes from being a results-evaluating superior so they can effectively coach as a problem-solving peer. They must resist the temptation to use the power component of the relationship to simply dictate the solutions to problems when the two of them engage as problem-solving peers. They must accept that simply telling does not always lead to understanding on the part of the direct report. They must act as if this is the boss’s failure, not the direct report’s, when this occurs.

At other times, particularly at the end of the performance period, bosses must take on the tough challenge of carrying through on negative consequences when the direct report’s performance has been lacking. This is not easy if the boss has developed a “liking” for the person through working with the individual as a problem-solving peer. It will be even harder if the boss has failed to coach effectively in the regular review meetings between the two.

Human beings’ instinctive approach to managing performance in organizations – power-based performance appraisal – is much easier, especially on bosses. That is one of the reasons it persists in organizations. Almost all well-established organizations use performance appraisal as part of their people management tool set.

The real problem is that performance appraisal just does not motivate the folks who are appraised to produce “above every day” or excellent results. So, if you are interested in getting people to perform, abandon performance appraisal. Train yourself in the skill needed to be a future-looking performance contractor instead.

## The Second Belief: Most Soft Skill Training = A Waste of Organizational Dollars

Organizations waste the dollars they spend on interpersonal skill training (e.g. programs on leading others, resolving conflict ...).



### How did I get here?

. My conclusions based on decades of experience. I have worked in organizations:

1. as a doer, as a team leader,
2. as a manager / director,
3. and as a C-level executive.

The organizations have ranged in size from the very large (tens of thousands of staff) to the very small (a few people).

Once I got to an 'executive level', most of my work has been focused on turnarounds and on improving organizational performance. I am still actively involved with clients, and with my own entrepreneurial business.

## **Four Core Experience Based Conclusions About Life in Organizations**

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Over the course of my career, I have kept up a constant involvement in academic life – as a night student, graduate student, part time lecturer and distance education participant. I have, and still do, read widely in management and workplace psychology. I have thought hard about what I was doing at work and how I was leading the folks who worked for me.

I have come to these four conclusions by reflecting on both the reading and the experience. I have quietly held them for years. They underlie all my consulting work and business writing.

### **Most Soft Skill Training = A Waste of Money**

If interpersonal behavior on-the-job does not change as a result of training, the money spent on it is wasted. Most of the money spent on organizations on Interpersonal or soft skill training is therefore wasted.

Very little interpersonal behavior training leads to behavior changes on-the job, despite the millions of dollars spent on managerial, supervisory and interpersonal skills training. Everyone 'kind of' knows this. That is why there is so few systematic follow-up programs to measure actual "on-the-job" behavior after such training programs. As long as we don't have to face the facts, we can continue to believe.

### **The reasons for the waste**

There are two reasons why behavior change back on-the-job after participating in interpersonal skill type of training program is so hard.

#### **Personal Motivation**

Unless individuals are personally motivated, they are not going to change their behavior back at work (or in their personal lives), even if they learn the underlying ideas and concepts.

Self selection and self initiation of participation in such training is a good indicator of the needed motivation. Personally enrolling oneself in this type of course is a good predictor that the individual might indeed have the needed motivation needed to actually change behavior back on-the-job. Expending personal resources to pay for the training is an even better one.

Being 'sent' on such program by your organization has very little to do with having the level of personal motivation needed to actually change behavior on the job. Yet many organizations ask people to attend such training programs because

- a. the "boss" thinks it is a good thing,

- b. or because it is the norm for all people who first enter a certain job level,
- c. or because some executive has come to believe that this type of training has payback.

### **The New Behavior Extinction Effect**

**Individuals behave in interlocked patterns at work.** If one person changes his or her interpersonal behavior, the others that the person interacts with have to change theirs as well. These other people are often not motivated to do so.

Instead, they put group peer pressure on the person who changes his or her behavior after attending a training program to revert to the old behaviors the person had before they went on the training program - the social extinction effect. Most individuals who try to implement new behaviors do revert to the old behaviors in the face of this implicit social pressure. The training investment is lost.

The individuals who persist in wanting to change their behaviour after such training often respond to the peer pressure by finding new people to work with. Usually, this means moving to a new job. Often, that new job is with another employer. The training investment is lost.

### **Upgrading Interpersonal Skills at Work Means Changing the Culture of the Organization**

Organizations who want to really change interpersonal behavior patterns need to engage in systematic culture change programs. As well as training, such programs involve visible recognition and compensation programs that reward the “new behaviour”. These programs also involve specific activities that counter “resistance” to change on the part of current members of the culture.

Such programs are difficult to plan and to execute. They must work from the top down and the bottom up in a coordinated way. They are intensely resource demanding. They require persistence over extended periods of time.

Few organizations succeed at such culture change programs at the level of “walk”. Most organizations though engage in “talk” as if they are doing such things, even if they don’t really do them.

### **When You Decide to Invest in Interpersonal Skill Training for a Person**

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As an organizational leader, there are a couple of simple things to consider when you decide to invest in interpersonal or soft skill training for an individual.

1. When you invest in an individual's interpersonal behavior change, you also need to consider moving that person to a new job to have a reasonable chance of recouping on your investment.
2. When individuals are motivated to spend personal resources on changing their interpersonal behaviour at work, they are at high risk for leaving your organization in order to find another job where they can practice those new skills. That hurts, since these individuals are usually the ones most self-motivated to improve their personal performance at work.

### The Third Belief: Most Recruiting is focused on “good enough”

Interview based recruiting is all about “good enough” hiring, not future performance excellence on-the-job.



### Talk-based Recruiting Persists

The academic research is clear – talk during recruiting interviews is not correlated with eventual final candidate performance on-the-job. But everybody continues to do to use talk-based interviewing as their primary recruiting tool. Why?

Talk-based interviewing finds “good enough” candidates - on the technical skill level and culture fit level. Talk-based interviewing does not systematically succeed in finding the “best candidates”. It does not need to. Good enough is good enough for most organizations. Few organizations are really excellent. Most organizations talk ‘excellence’, even when they don’t ‘walk’ it.

### Recruiting for Excellent, As Opposed to ‘Good Enough’ Performance

It is possible to recruit for excellence. It takes “show us how you will perform with the people that you will be working with” recruiting techniques. This means crafting work-based role plays and work-based simulations. They are more difficult to set up and to facilitate than interviews. Creating them, and then facilitating them, is far beyond the skill of most recruiting professionals.

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The best way to see how a person will behave in the future – on the job, is to get them to behave currently. Get candidates to do, not talk about what they have done. Even “behavior-based interviewing” does not do that.

Job-based role-plays and work simulations go some way to allowing the assessment of performance fit. Involving future peers in interacting with candidates and then systematically collecting their impressions of fit allows some level of assessment of cultural fit.

The best hires – excellent performance fit to a particular job and superb emotional fit to a specific organization’s culture - are often temporary workers who have already “demonstrated” how they will perform on the job. You see what they can do and how they will interact with their fellow co-workers during their temporary assignment. The best predictor of future behavior is always actual current behavior, not talk about behavior.

Bringing the person in on a temporary basis is the best way to assess both performance fit and culture fit. It remains the best hiring tactic if you are hiring for excellence. If you are not, then do what most organizations do - hire for ‘good enough. Then the talk that happens in recruiting interviews will suffice.

## The Fourth Belief: Life in Organizations is Very Closer to Life in Tribes Than You Think

Many human abilities are as much instinctive as thoughtful. Excellence at work requires thought rather than just responding instinctively.



### You Cannot Get Away from Tens of Thousands of Years of Evolution as Tribal Beings

More and more, modern research is showing how much of our human capability to do and to interact with others utilizes ability systems that located in the pre-conscious parts of our brains. These evolved ability systems let us become the dominant species on the planet tens of thousands of years ago.

Somewhere in the past 40,000 years or so, we began to move from being tribal creatures to being societal ones. We started to live in conglomerations of individuals which were bigger than one tribe. Previously, as simple tribal members, we might have had occasional interactions with members of a few other geographically local tribes. But

as societal creatures, we developed (i.e. added) the ability to be concurrent members of a number of tribe-like social collections that exist within our societies.

### **Life in Organizations Is Based on Our Evolutionary Life in Tribes**

As societal creatures, we developed organizations that specialized in achieving at least some of the objectives of each of their members. We shaped these organizations in ways that reflected our evolution as tribal beings. Inside our organizations we use the hierarchy and insider/outsider dynamics and abilities that we evolved as part of our history as tribal creatures.

At the same time, as societal creatures, we developed shared mechanisms and processes for collaborating within and across these organizations. Many of these mechanisms are anchored in our use of shared tools. Those tools can serve physical objectives - gathering, growing, and manufacturing, or information sharing and management objectives.

### **Tribal Life is about the Survival of the Tribe, Societal Life is about Organizational Collaboration**

Organizations traded with other organizations for the resources needed to achieve those objectives of each organization's members. Thoughtful, structured, planned ways of interacting with individuals in these other organizations became as important a part of our human abilities as our instinctive ways of interacting with other individuals in families and in tribes.

Today, we have all these types of ability. Our gene-based evolutionary history adds new abilities to our competency repertoires. It does not replace the ones we already have with these new ones. Evolution also does not act to integrate new abilities with old ones in balanced way. As a species, we have simply added more thought-based, conscious organizational abilities to our older instinctive interpersonal familial and tribal ones. Evolution adds abilities, rather than replacing them.

### **The Impact of Stress**

Stress is a large part of our organizational and societal life. Under stress, we tend to fall back on our instinctive abilities, even when they might not be as effective for dealing with a given situation as our thought-based abilities. Our instinctive abilities often define our business and societal interactions. Much confusion and turbulence occurs in organizations and in societies as a result.

### **Modern managers are part thought-based and part instinct-based performers.**

Understanding and mitigating the results of these dynamics requires that managers in organizations consciously override their instinctive first responses with careful,

thoughtful, analytically-based responses. The next generation of organizational behavior writing and business professional development curriculum needs to be much more clearly explicit about the evolutionary nature of human abilities. We need to move from theories of “emotional intelligence” to ones that more clearly reflect the additive evolution of our abilities.

We need to make sure that managers understand that they concurrently have instinctive interpersonal and thoughtful organizational abilities. We need to help them recognize that our instinctive abilities, the ones we all move to under most levels of stress, are not the best ones to use to respond to the demands of organizational and societal life.

### **Acceptance Leads to Hope**

There is tremendous hope for us as human beings. Our evolution has given us the ability to shape our collective future through collaborative, thoughtful organizational action. But we often do not. Our evolution has also given us the capacity to interact in ways that are firmly embedded in the pre-conscious instinctive abilities that evolved when we were members of families, living in tribes.

We need to move beyond the familial and tribal in organizational and societal life in order to have a future of hope, not one of self-defeating strife.

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### **Who is Roelf Woldring?**

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**Founder and CEO**

**The Right Talent**

**[www.the-right-talent.ca](http://www.the-right-talent.ca)**

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