

Should Organizational Behavior Management Expand Its Content? A Third Perspective on E. Scott Geller's Article

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We read with great interest the debate in *JOBM (Volume 22, Number 2, 2002)* concerning the marketing of OBM and possible paradigm shifts. For readers who have not read this issue of *JOBM*, Geller argued that OBM should begin to include relevant concepts from cognitive, social, and personality psychology (2002). The I/O psychology contributors supported Geller's recommendations.

Over the past several years, the first author has become increasingly alarmed at the devolution of OBM thinking back to person-centered, mentalistic explanations of human behavior. Geller and other contributors argued that this reversion is needed to better market OBM to business organizations. We are sure this logic was also used as a counter by the 'flat earth society' in another era.

Instead of 'going under the skin' again, a promising alternative is to expand our OBM concepts in the broader direction of a systems perspective. Rather than ally OBM with cognitive, social and personality psychology, we should be looking at disciplines such as systems theory, economics, and ecology. As the Gestalt psychologists instructed us, the organization is more than the sum of its parts. That is, the organization cannot be understood by simply adding up the specific behaviors and predispositions of individual employees.

Though there are differences in emphasis, several notable OBM practitioners have advocated the behavior systems perspective including Tom Gilbert, Geary Rummler, Dwight Harshbarger, Maria Malott, and Dale Brethower. Furthermore, these practitioners have found an audience for the approach without reintroducing mentalism.

It is our belief that OBM suffers from 'rataphilia' in the same way that personality psychology suffers from 'Freudaphilia'. The 'Skinner box' has seduced us into thinking that real life is about one 'operandum' and one organism. Just as the physicist has difficulty predicting where a leaf will fall in a windstorm, so does the OBM practitioner find it difficult to apply his or her ABC model in the windstorm of contingencies that constitute an organization. This difficulty does not mean that the principles of the physicist or behavior analyst are wrong; it simply demonstrates the multiplicity of contingencies operating outside of the laboratory and their complex interactions. At a past ABA conference, the first author was asked to sit on a panel chaired by my associate, Mark Rushing. Mark was arguing that our field should be called OCM (organizational contingency management) rather than OBM. During the first author's part of the panel discussion he asked the question, "When is the best time to implement OBM? Before a company hires any employees, or after the employee group is in place?" A well-known OBM practitioner responded that OBM could not be applied until employees were present. Mark and the first author argued it would be more efficient to engineer optimal organizational contingencies before anyone showed up for work. This difference of opinions, in my view, highlights distinctions between traditional OBM and the behavior systems view.

We would like to reiterate that we do not think a systems approach to organizational change is inconsistent with behavior analysis traditionally conceived. In fact, one of the greatest influences on my conversion from the 'single-subject' perspective to the systems perspective was none other than B.F. Skinner. In *Walden Two*, he described a community in which the contingencies controlling the members' behavior were explicitly engineered. The notion that a system might be designed in which desired

behavior could be maintained without continuous observation at the individual level has stayed with us and continues to guide our approach to organizational analysis and development.

Before going into the details of how such an analysis might be approached, it may be worthwhile to revisit the reasons for which behavior analysis has traditionally approached behavior at the individual level. Briefly stated, behavior occurs at the individual level and, in formulating principles by which behavior may be understood, analysis at the individual level is warranted. Such an approach is consistent with the goal of developing principles of behavior that are general across individuals. To this extent, that this approach is consistent with the goal of developing general principles and useful in achieving it, it might be considered *true*. As a pragmatic science, there is no truth in our methods but the relationship they bear with respect to the goals to which they are directed. It is by this criteria which we measure truth.

In influencing the behavior of individuals operating within an organizational system, it may be useful to revisit the goal of this endeavor. If the goal is to describe principles by which behavior may be understood, there is certainly some degree of truth to the assertion that behavior should be addressed at the individual level. The people and institutions with whom we contract, however, often have a different goal. Typically, this is one of organizational improvement more generally. Assuming this goal, attention must be given to the means by which we move toward it. We must ask ourselves if we are interested in changing the behavior of an individual within an organization or impacting the profitability and outcomes of the organization more generally.

It is our contention that a systems approach to organizational change is more in line with the goal of organizational change than targeting individual behavior specifically. While it is ultimately the behavior of individuals that will be impacted by such an approach, the behavior of individuals in this case is not the measure of interest specifically. Further, we would contend that, within the context of an organization, an analysis that begins at the individual level neglects the ultimate mission of the organization - *mission* in this case meaning the reason the organization exists in the first place - the value that it adds to the lives of its consumers. Further, as will be outlined below, a systems perspective does not neglect the behavior of the individual; such a perspective merely recognizes that the individual is behaving within a broader environment and, in doing so, approaches the problem of behavior change accordingly.

It should be noted that a systems approach is in no way attempting to ignore the behavior of individuals. There is, from our perspective, no such thing as organizational behavior. The problem then, is not with how the field of OBM has identified its dependent variables, rather its independent variables. In OBM, we refer to these as the contingencies. The OBM practice of identifying one or two antecedents, one behavior, and an additional one or two consequences does not adequately describe events operating in the world outside of the laboratory.

The simplicity and inadequacy of the abovementioned analysis has not been ignored in the field of OBM. Unfortunately, some have maintained that, in the interest of expanding our analysis, we should look at events occurring inside the skin. While looking at what is occurring beneath the skin is certainly in the interest of a complete understanding of the event under study, such an analysis at this point seems premature. Presently, we have no cost-effective and reliable methods by which to understand and intervene on such phenomena.

In addition, the field of OBM has done little to examine what these authors believe to be the more important (from a survival standpoint) external contingencies and their interactions. This is what is meant by a "systems" analysis. Our analyses must focus on the independent variables. In even the simplest situations, these variables are numerous and interact in complex ways. What is needed then is a methodology and conceptual framework for describing and reengineering complex contingency systems.

The following section of this paper will discuss one means by which an organization may be approached from a systems perspective such that individual behavior is generally influenced. We think that the reader will find that, while the analysis does not start at the individual level, the performance of the individual is not neglected; it is merely considered at a different point in time. We feel that such an approach is one way in which OBM might expand the impact it has with respect to organizational improvement and, as a function, increase its recognition and acceptance more generally.

From a systems framework, the first question one might ask is: what are organizational contingencies? One class of contingencies that is roughly equivalent to the antecedent in a traditional ABC analysis is the specification of desired outcomes. These include market analyses, financial analyses, strategic planning, as well as job descriptions, hiring practices, training, policies, and communications. A second class of contingencies is more related to the B in the ABC analysis. These are the work processes, workflow, job methods, and tools. Finally, the C in the ABC analysis refers to consequences that include supervision, peer behaviors, performance reviews, promotions, job assignments, and compensation. These are only examples and not meant to be a comprehensive list.

Phase I: Organizational Measurement.

As stated above, a key difference between a systems approach and a traditional OBM analysis is that a systems approach should begin with an examination and definition of the organization's key survival outcomes at each level of the organization. It does little good to focus on employee behavior management or process improvement if the company is not producing goods or services which are of value to some demographic. Under such conditions, an organization will likely fail regardless of how productive the individuals constituting it may be.

As such, the organizational analyst must have some knowledge of how business functions to make a profit. Though this may sound daunting to someone whose training is in a science of individual behavior, the good news is that there appears to be substantial consistencies in key business outcomes across organizations. In other words, there seem to be general principles by which organizations may be understood. The difference between organizations producing different goods or services are more related to priorities than actual business outcomes. (see Abernathy (ref.) for a detailed methodology by which these outcomes may be identified) Once the key outcomes are defined the second part of Phase I involves setting goals that reflect these unique priorities and that will achieve the organization's business objectives.

Phase II: Feedback and Performance Pay.

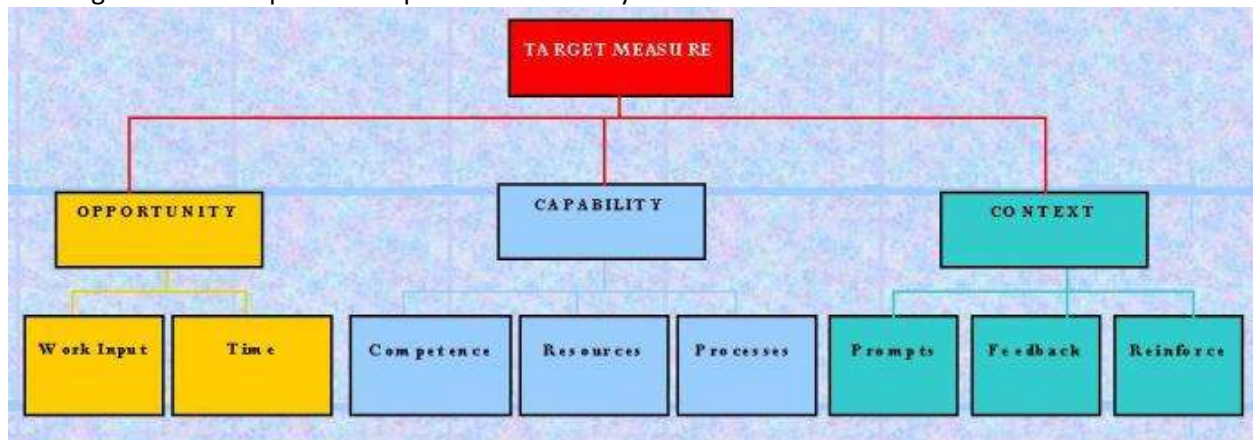
The second phase is to implement an organization-wide performance feedback and performance pay system based upon the measurements developed in the first phase. Because business results are typically tracked monthly, the 'feedback' and 'performance pay' system is often restricted to monthly

reporting and payouts. Despite these delays, we have consistently obtained an average 30% performance improvement with the implementation of monthly feedback and performance pay.

Phase III: Performance Contingency Analysis.

Many critical results will not improve with only monthly feedback and incentive pay. On the other hand, to attempt targeted improvement efforts in the absence of the monthly feedback and incentives proves both difficult to implement, and very difficult to sustain. The monthly tracking pinpoints which results need improvement and the performance pay sustains the improvements once they are made. Once the results measurement, feedback, and performance pay system is in place, the third phase is the contingency analysis. This analysis is guided by a review of the measure trends obtained in the second phase.

We have organized our contingency analysis into three categories: opportunity, capability, and context. The diagram below depicts the top level of this analysis.



We find it most efficient to conduct the contingency analyses from left to right - that is opportunity, then capability, and finally 'context'. This means we begin our analysis with a review of workflow across the organization. If work input is absent, late or poor quality, it makes little sense to implement an ABC type intervention. Similarly, if employees do not have the time to perform the work due to poor staffing, scheduling, or work distribution an ABC intervention will likely fail.

Next, we examine capability including employee competence, work resources, and job methods. Employee selection practices and the types of training largely determine competence. Resources refer to the tools and materials required to complete the job while processes refer to job methods and procedures. Again, an ABC analysis will have little impact on a group of employees who don't know how to perform, lack the resources, or who have been saddled with inefficient work methods.

Finally, we examine the context in which the performance occurs. This is the place that the conventional ABC analysis has within this approach. If opportunity and capability are adequate to achieve the performance goals, then a direct behavioral intervention is warranted.

Phase IV: Organizational Contingency Reengineering.

This phase involves a review of the organization's human resource practices including selection, orientation, job assignments, supervision, performance reviews, and compensation. Ideally, this phase

would occur first, but this has proven impractical without a solid performance measurement system in place.

In conclusion, three views of how OBM may evolve have been presented. The first is to simply continue our ABC practices with direct interventions and manager training. The second, as proposed by Geller, is to make OBM more palatable by integrating it with organizational psychology and more generally familiar nomenclature. The third is to adopt a systems perspective as described here.

In considering which approach to adopt it is important to consider the goals of our endeavor and, in doing so, to adopt an approach that is consistent with those goals in a pragmatic sense. If palatability does indeed move us closer to that goal, it stands that such an approach should necessarily be adopted. It is our hypothesis that, while the language we employ may be of interest as a selling point, borrowing from more popularly accepted divisions of psychology ultimately does little to address the value of our product in terms of its stated goals. In other words, borrowing the language of other psychological disciplines will not add to the impact of the interventions that we design. This, of course, is an empirical question and deserves to be addressed as such.

It is not an empirical problem, however, that such an approach risks the integrity of our field as a discipline that is based in theoretically and philosophically coherent, scientific principles. While we are not advocating for an organizational approach that begins by addressing behavior at the individual level, such an approach is, at the very least rooted in such principles. Additionally, we feel that a systems approach is similarly based, although, as we contend, at a level that is more appropriate to its goals.

To conclude, the field of OBM is at a critical juncture in its development. Which path we choose will determine our viability and impact. As the literature has demonstrated, expanding the reach of this impact may be approached in a variety of ways. Though adopting concepts of other psychological disciplines may make OBM more attractive to businesspeople in the short term, we feel that this does not address the real problems facing the field. Precisely, we feel that in order to expand our reach in meaningful ways we must field a better product and that, ultimately, the value of that product will be measured in terms of the impact it has at the organizational level. We would hope that more practitioners would adopt the approach presented here as it addresses this need from a position that is consistent with its goals and rooted in firm science.

References

Geller, S. E. (2002). Leadership to overcome resistance to change: It takes more than consequence control. *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*, 22, 29-49.