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INTERVIEWER:

What was your impression of the afternoon? What kinds of things struck you as high points about the conversations and what people were talking about today?

HRASTAR:

It was an interesting conversation today, they always are. This one with the topic about perfection was so captivating we were all over the place on it. We ended up talking a lot about what makes a perfect organization, which was interesting although it actually wasn't the question. One of the things that struck me about the question the first time I heard it was how would I know? How would I know, personally? I was one of those people that took it very personally. What would I notice differently myself? Not to try and say, how would I define a perfect organization, but if I came in one day and it had been made perfect overnight, what would be different? The things I thought in that regard were things like, I would have fewer instances of having to tell people something for the third time, or I would have less need to sort out disagreements or things like that. Or I would not have to worry that people were not driving the organization. I would not have to tell people to do things, but rather what would be happening is people would be taking initiative and solving problems and trying different things, all of course in line with the strategy and the goals and the vision and the purpose of the organization because it would be working perfectly. A lot of the daily noise and chatter, even if it wasn't major problems, would not be present. There would just be much less people-related clutter; misunderstandings, miscommunications, things of that nature.

Of course, if I think further out, how would I know an organization was running perfectly? Certain other things would be happening as well – happy customers and so on. I was looking at using the perfection that I noticed as a steering mechanism, because if I am in a perfect organization I'm noticing less of that clutter, and then I can say if I see that clutter now I need to do something. And so it becomes a way that I can manage, in some ways very directly because it's something that very specifically is not the perfect organization. Not to be confused, by the way, with, "Gee, if I never heard of any problems, things must be perfect." Meanwhile, it's all falling apart underneath me.

INTERVIEWER:

Each one of us who was participating came at this from a different angle, looking at either their personal role in how they would experience a perfect organization, or what role they played in causing that to happen. You're looking at a way of how you would see the organization. How can you analyze it when it's operating perfectly, when it's not, and look for ways to implement those high-performance elements into daily operations when you see things that are not the way they should be?

HRASTAR:

The way they're supposed to be? Yes, instead of being the chief at the top of the mountain looking at all this, being part of the system and being a data point yourself. And so when you talk about how do you make those things self-reinforcing, one of the things we didn't talk much about – we touched on it – was the impact that the leader has just by virtue of the fact that they're the leader. I mentioned that in this kind of discussion we're all peers and we can have a certain conversation. But when we're alone in our organization and everyone else is a subordinate what we do and say has a much different kind of impact on them. And sometimes as leaders of organizations we don't really realize how much power we have, and not in a forceful or overbearing kind of way, but by virtue of the office. It's a fact that leaders simply think differently.

INTERVIEWER:

It's an influence issue.

HRASTAR:

It's an influence yes, that we have and often don't utilize. And in fact we were talking about how sometimes we actually stifle that to a certain extent – going back to what Eve said about the courage to say no – and because sometimes you're trying to work with the whole interpersonal dynamics. Sometimes it's easier to let something be a little less harsh. But then what that does is it blurs, maybe, the sharpness of the vision of the organization, and then people aren't quite so clear as to what to do or where to go or things like that.

To bring back, how do you make some of these things happen, get them implemented, and make them self-reinforcing? I believe some of it comes back to just being clear even if it might be a little more difficult than being less clear but nicer. It's not that you can't be nice while you're being clear but sometimes the fear is "I'll let this slide a little bit so as to not ruffle feathers." To make mayonnaise you've got to crack a few eggs. Sometimes you have to do that. But that clarity and that consistency of the actions, especially of the leader, are what then perpetuate because whatever the person at the top of the organization does is ultimately mirrored by everyone else, because those things that that person says or does are obviously important by definition, coming from the leader of the organization. And so everyone who's directly connected will say, "Aha, now that he or she said X, I know that's important so I'm going to align with that. I'm going to do the same kinds of things and emphasize the same kinds of things and put my focus in the same place and encourage the same things and reward the same things." And it cascades down through the organization. Now, to do that sometimes and not all the time, now you're getting kind of fuzzy. You are lacking the clarity and it's not self-perpetuating. You're not getting the reinforcement through the organization. Everybody's being fuzzy or everybody's a loose cannon or something. You don't have everyone lined up marching the same direction and everyone knowing that they're lined up and marching in the same direction. If you don't have everyone lined up and marching in the same direction, you just don't have the power of an organization, much like the light coming out of a light bulb is not nearly as powerful as the light coming out of a laser because one is just going all over the place and the other, all the photons are perfectly synchronized.

I think in some regards even large changes, things of major importance, in some ways aren't all that hard to do. The hard part is doing them clearly and consistently so that everybody sees and everybody gets in step. It's not to say it happens overnight. It may not be easy, but it's not complicated. It's pretty straightforward.

INTERVIEWER:

We've talked about the humanness of the leader and the humanness of the relationships that a leader is required to manage or utilize to move an organization forward. In a human infrastructure is it necessary to depersonalize these relationships in order to make those consistent decisions, those consistent applications? How much can the human element be set aside, suppressed, by thinking of this in a more infrastructural approach?

HRASTAR:

That's an interesting question. I think there's no possible way to be successful in working in human infrastructure by ignoring humans. I understand what you're asking with the question. Humans are messy. Humans are complex. Humans are inconsistent, and if you can take out that complexity and that inconsistency and that messiness, they'd be a lot easier to manage.

INTERVIEWER:

But they wouldn't be human?

HRASTAR:

But they wouldn't be human. And then you would also lose the spontaneity. You would lose the serendipity. You would lose the innovation. You would lose the creativity. But I also don't think it's black and white. I don't think it's an either/or. I don't think you have to say, "I can build a good human infrastructure by ignoring the human part, or I have to deal with people as people and then I don't have a good human infrastructure." I'll go

back to what I was saying before. If you think of these humans as difficult critters and you've got to corral them somehow and it's a matter of force and will to make them do certain things you're always going to have problems. When we were talking in your interview about it's not so much the leader saying, "Do X, Y and Z," but "Let's all get together and work on what we're trying to accomplish", then you get the best of both worlds. You can have a human infrastructure that works to support whatever that is. Everybody knows what it is. Everybody has the tools to be able to do it. Everyone knows what's expected of them. Everybody knows that they'll be supported. Everyone knows that they can make decisions as long as the decisions are supporting the goals and the vision of the organization. You end up with the benefits of the serendipity and the creativity and the innovation, and people are natural at building communities. They're naturally resilient. There's a natural affinity to work together in a certain way. Frankly, a lot of times I see organizations where it's almost as if the organization was designed to suppress people by the rules and regulations and the bureaucracy and the policies and procedures. Sometimes just making them do things that aren't really the core of their expertise, it's a bad design of the division of work or the workflow, and sometimes it's people who don't think about humans as humans but think of humans as a pair of hands to make the widget and that's all they're good for and so I don't want them thinking by themselves.

I was just talking with Jack Moore, and he talked about a phase back in the 1950s during that company's history where they had an industrial psychologist who would test all the prospective hires because they wanted passive employees. They were trying to get people who were passive. "Do this, this way, and I don't want to hear from you." They would select for people like that. The company lasted over one hundred years before it was sold to Warren Buffett for a billion dollars. They no longer do that – even a paint manufacturer needs innovative, thinking employees – but it worked back then. And in fact I would bet there were a lot of companies back then that were like that, and practically none right now who so explicitly look for passive employees. It seems kind of quaint and old-fashioned or archaic. But in today's businesses that are knowledge-based, service-based – in short, human-based – that would never work. You just can't run a business that runs on human capital and look for passive people and expect to get any sort of results. It just doesn't work. To loop back to the question about the humans versus the infrastructure part, I think the real answer is a good human infrastructure is built on the strengths of humans as opposed to what many organizations these days have as an infrastructure that is built on the strength of, say, machines and we're trying to fit humans into that paradigm and it doesn't work too well.

INTERVIEWER:

We've talked about the evolution of knowledge-based workers and the struggle that we're all having with this huge flow of knowledge. How do we move to this next generation of workforce?

HRASTAR:

It used to be, knowledge was power. Now, knowledge is a raw material, or knowledge is a commodity. The question of how we acquire and store knowledge is no longer a problem. Google does that now. Now the question is how do we assimilate? How do we get the insight? How do we work our way up that chain of data, information, knowledge, insight, and wisdom? The whole aspect of the human infrastructure, which is now developing as what any knowledge base or service kind of company really should be built around, actually enables the creation of this new kind of organization that's built not on knowledge but on the insight or the innovation or assimilation or synthesis. I believe that even progressive organizations with good people cultures can't work that way without the right kind of human infrastructure.

INTERVIEWER:

There still has to be some mechanism to translate from desired outcome to actual success through the process of working with people. It's going to be interesting in the next few years to see how the concept of leading people evolves as the nature of information and the nature of social communication continues to evolve.

HRASTAR:

When everything was based on things, then there was a certain type of economy that existed. I have an apple. You have an apple. I give you an apple. You give me an apple. We each now still only have one apple. Now think about this. I have an idea. You have an idea. I give you an idea. You give me an idea. Now we each have two ideas. It's a whole different way of working. And when your business moves forward on ideas and when the advancement of your business is the next new idea, the innovation, insight, synthesis, distillation of information, it's more prevalent and it's more of a driver these days in business going forward. What used to be the case with I have an apple, you have an apple, that just doesn't work because if it's now all about ideas, I have an idea, you have an idea. Now we each have two ideas. It's a different way of managing. It's a different economy. It's different accounting. It's different marketing.

INTERVIEWER:

What will you do differently yourself or from a different perspective with your clients?

HRASTAR:

I'll say one thing that also everybody else said – the concept of shedding. It's something that we all have glommed onto, and it's also something that was not a new idea to anybody but got recharged. Everybody says "You know, I should do some of that." And of course I've been doing some shedding, as you know, for some years, but still it's good to have the discipline to sit down and look at things in context. I'll be doing some of that as well. The other thing I'd put in the category of what I'll be emphasizing more with my clients is the focusing on the human infrastructure as the more insightful, innovative kind of work. More and more companies need that to make the change that they want to get to, in part because of the grand transformation, industrial to knowledge economy and now going forward, but also in part because the competitive landscape has gone into hyper speed because things can happen so quickly. A new idea can be so very quickly copied. Whole businesses can start up. Look at Groupon, which has been around for three years and is now worth 15 billion dollars. There's the speed at which things are happening and can happen even at scales heretofore unimaginable. It's demanding that we get out in front by using the innovation and the insight. The only way to do that is if you have the right kind of human infrastructure, not an old-fashioned infrastructure with a good people culture. That's not going to get you there.

I've always been a big proponent of the human infrastructure in a broad sense. At a certain level of operation you have to have it right or you just can't get where you want to go. Building that requires some basic principles. It's some practices. It's some attitudes. It's a very different mindset for a lot of people.

INTERVIEWER:

Maybe it's a distilling down to those components of interaction and people leadership that are relevant and getting rid of the rest.

HRASTAR:

And if you have that simplicity, you have that clarity, you have the consistency, now you can get people aligned, moving in the same direction, and you have a lot more power in your organization because everybody knows where you're going. Simplicity is the new sophistication.