

Feedback on the Papers: Twelve Themes Organization Theory – Fall 2003

1. Carefully reading the assignment and actively listening to the instructor are essential for you to understand the purpose, requirements, and expectations of the written assignment. Don't simply ASSUME that you understand everything: you may be making several FALSE assumptions that will prevent you from successfully completing the assignment. KEY: Consider your understanding of any complex assignment as an UNCERTAIN-IMPORTANT assumption that must be tested by asking specific questions of the instructor (in class, after class, during office hours, or via e-mail exchanges). Challenge: *Can you analyze (using the steps of problem management) how you proceeded to complete this assignment with one or more false assumptions?*

2. I cautioned everyone to **double-check and triple-check** the requirements of the assignment while you were in the midst of actually doing this assignment in order to make absolutely sure that you were not missing anything. Did you do this?

3. You must understand the core material from the course BEFORE you write your individual paper. Specifically, you must first clearly understand the five steps and errors of problem management, the process of assumptional analysis, the content and sequence of the eight tracks (especially culture, skills, and teams – the quantum infrastructure). Working very hard on the paper without fully understanding this core knowledge will not lead to a successful outcome. **Be sure to study all reading materials, including class notes and overhead slides, come to every class, stay fully awake, use active listening, ask questions at the class level, be active in every group meeting, ask questions in your group, and then see me during office hours or write me e-mails so that I can answer your questions and thereby remove your uncertainty (and false assumptions) about the core concepts and the assignments.**

4. Even more specifically, the essential knowledge for this paper is as follows: You must know, without uncertainty, the vital difference between sensing problems and defining problems – and never confuse these two steps of problem management. You

must know how to write assumptions in order to show explicit support for an initial conclusion – that the link between every assumption and the initial conclusion must be crystal clear. You must know the difference between a false assumption and an uncertain assumption. (If you say that false assumptions are not plotted on the matrix, you do not understand assumptional analysis.) You must know that systems are the major cause of any complex organizational problem, so that cultural dysfunctions are likely to be one decision tree. Also, in most cases, additional decision trees would be that the members do not understand the steps and errors of problem management, that they are living by unconscious, false assumptions, and that they do not know the key principles and practices of group process.

5. In terms of demonstrating your knowledge in the paper, you must organize your paper into sections **AND BE ABSOLUTELY SURE THAT IN EACH SECTION OF YOUR PAPER YOU DISCUSS ONLY WHAT SHOULD BE IN THAT SECTION.** Otherwise the sections serve no purpose except to confuse the reader. Therefore in the section on describing your organization and industry, you do **NOT** include sensing and defining the problems or other material that will be discussed in other sections of the paper. In the section on sensing problems, you do not add more detailed descriptions of your organization; you only include symptoms that lead you to believe that there are significant problems that must be addressed. You also do not suggest, implicitly or explicitly, any causes of the problem or why these symptoms might be occurring. You **ONLY** discuss sensings in the section on problem sensings. The same applies to the section on defining problems: You do not give more description or details of the organization or repeat the various symptoms of the problem. Only discuss root causes in the section of your paper on problem defining!

6. Use paragraphs to organize your discussion within each section. Each paragraph contains only one theme, whether the paragraph is one sentence or several sentences long. To include many themes within the same paragraph results in the same outcome as including many themes within one sentence: the reader will be confused! For example, in the defining section, every paragraph is focused on one decision tree and no other material is introduced into that one paragraph. The first sentence of a paragraph refers to

a specific decision tree, Decision Tree #1, gives it a name, and proceeds to describe the nature of that one decision tree only. The next paragraph starts with a sentence that refers specifically to Decision Tree #2, gives it a name, and proceeds to discuss that tree only. A figure is not a substitute for a clear written discussion; a figure merely gives a visual, shorthand representation of the discussion in the paragraphs.

7. **Even more detail:** Problem sensing is strictly about deciding whether there are significant problems (gaps) that need attention through the remaining steps of problem management. The essential question: Do we proceed with problem defining, etc., or don't we? Specifically, we look for signs, signals – symptoms – to see if there might be strategically significant problems that need to be addressed. *So what do you see or experience that would tell you that there ARE significant problems in this organization?* The classic signs are: decreasing revenue, profit, market share; losing customers, employees, or clients; major (not minor) complaints, frustrations, tensions, anger, rage, arguments, screaming, yelling, and frowns; employee lateness, absenteeism, poor performance, negative attitudes, hurtful behavior, unhealthy conflicts; stressed-out, tired, beaten-up members, and so forth. All of these signs say absolutely nothing about the causes of the problems, but they do inform us that we need to look further and that we must take the time to proceed with the next steps in problem management. **IT WOULD MAKE NO SENSE TO WASTE TIME AND EFFORT ON DISCOVERING ROOT CAUSES, PICKING SOLUTIONS, AND IMPLEMENTING SOLUTIONS, IF THERE WEREN'T STRATEGICALLY SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS IN THE ORGANIZATION.** If you proceeded with defining the problem and there were no signs that a significant problem existed, you would be committing a sensing error! Perhaps to refine your skills in sensing problems, consider what are the signs, signals – symptoms – that would reveal the existent of significant problems between two friends, two lovers, several family members, a small group, a work group, and, then, a complex organization – without immediately jumping, prematurely, to defining the root causes of something that might not even exist?

8. **HERE IS A TEST:** What discussion and only what discussion do you include under the section: Sensing Problems? How can you make sure that you understand this

question and its answer? What will you do to make sure that you do not rewrite your paper based on the same false assumptions as before?

9. Regarding the section on assumptional analysis, you must analyze the assigned initial conclusion. (Some of you CHANGED the initial conclusion to something else, even though the formal assignment made it clear that this was not acceptable! Are we carefully reading the assignment and actively listening to the professor?) It is vital, as was emphasized in class, to write assumptions that show explicit support for – a logical, clear, obvious LINK to – the initial conclusion. Since the initial conclusion stressed that the organization will achieve organizational success and personal meaning by proceeding of its present course (and, hence, without having to make any organizational changes or transformations), some LINKED assumptions would be: top management is already making the best strategic decisions for the company; top management already has the systems (and people) in place that are needed for organizational success in the future; the employees already have all the training they need in order to perform their jobs to the complete satisfaction of the customer; the employees, because of clearly defined jobs and effective work procedures, already know exactly what to do in order to achieve organizational success; employees are already motivated to the full extent of their capacity in order to achieve organizational success in the future; the cultural norms of the organization already encourage trust, honesty, cooperation, and communication throughout the organization; the cultural sanctioning systems in the organization already reinforce productive and satisfying behaviors and practices; the customers will continue to buy the organization's products and services no matter what they experience with the quality of these products and services; the organization already provides the best products and services relative to other organizations in the same industry; the organization already has all the systems and people in place in order to create and then market the next generation of innovative products and services.

10. After plotting your assumptions on the assumption matrix, any FALSE-IMPORTANT assumptions in the upper-right quadrant immediately suggest that the initial conclusion should be rejected! The uncertain-important assumptions in the lower-right quadrant are CRITICAL for a different reason: because it is not known whether

these uncertain-important assumptions are true or false. **THUS THERE IS A DANGER IN PROCEEDING WITH THE INITIAL CONCLUSION IN THE FACE OF NOT REALLY KNOWING REALITY!** If no false assumptions turn up, therefore, you cannot reject the initial conclusion. **NOW**, you must find out more about the **UNCERTAIN-IMPORTANT ASSUMPTIONS** – by asking questions, talking to people, conducting surveys, doing research, etc. If the uncertain assumptions do turn out to be false, you can then reject and revise the initial conclusion. **BUT DON'T CONTINUE TO SUPPORT THE INITIAL CONCLUSION IF YOU DON'T KNOW IF ONE OR MORE IMPORTANT ASSUMPTIONS ARE TRUE OR FALSE!**

11. If you reject the initial conclusion (which should be the case if you picked an organization that has serious problems), the revised conclusion suggests that systems and people need to be significantly changed or transformed *because* the organization cannot continue on its present course and achieve organizational success and personal meaning in the future. If, during the defining section, you realized that **SYSTEMS AND PEOPLE DECISION TREES** were some of the root cause of the problems (including dysfunctional cultural norms, ineffective sanctioning systems, deficient problem management (and technical/job) skills, poor group process, unclear or misguided strategy-structures, non-performance-based reward systems, etc.), you now have the basis for proposing effective solutions to solve the organization's major problems.

12. It is vital that you appreciate the need to sequence the eight tracks (solutions) for bringing about changes in systems and people. Why is it important to first address the infrastructure? Be clear on this! Then you can address other trees that have to do with lack of technical skills training, lack of strategic direction, unclear policies, procedures, jobs, and rules, and reward systems, etc. If you propose that the organization should first establish clear direction, train its employees, change its reward systems **AND YOU HAVEN'T FIRST ADDRESSED THE CULTURAL CONFUSION, THE LACK OF PROBLEM MANAGEMENT SKILLS, POOR GROUP PROCESS, ETC**, it is highly unlikely that any other solution will be taken seriously. **This fundamental principle of INFRASTRUCTURE FIRST is central to the entire course.** You must show that you understand this fundamental principle.

Any student who received an I grade must rewrite and submit his/her revised paper INCLUDING A COPY OF THE ORIGINAL PAPER WITH MY COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS – by Tuesday, December 9, 2003, at the start of class. That gives you 4 weeks to complete this assignment. Any student who received less than an A- grade can also rewrite and resubmit the individual paper. You cannot get a lower grade than your original grade, while you can receive an A+ grade if you deserve it!

CAUTION: When you redo your paper, be sure to use your own words in describing symptoms and writing assumptions. The specific examples given above are only intended to give you a clearer idea of what was missing in many of the papers. These examples are not meant as a substitute for your own work. You must apply the steps of problem management and assumptional analysis to your unique case in your own words.