

## Repairing Broken Business-Systems: it's all about defining roles

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Perhaps you know a business leader who has made the mistake of trying to develop “accountable” leaders and teams without first clearly defining roles—defining who should do what—in a way that makes sense in a business context.

Here's a strategy for avoiding the inevitable failures that result from such an approach: when performance in a business needs to be improved, the first place to look is at how effectively roles are being defined and how well interdependencies between roles are understood.

It stands to reason. A business is a system of roles designed to develop, sell and deliver products and services to customers. If key roles are missing or ineffective, poor performance is inevitable. Why some business leaders avoid this “system-of-roles conversation” is understandable. It is probably the hardest conversation for any leader to lead.

In this conversation, non-negotiable business needs have to be reconciled with individual willingness and ability. And, to make it even harder, power-politics are normal. On the other hand, when such conversations are not resolved in a transparent and motivating way, bad things can happen. For example, imagine that over time a business grows too complex for one business leader to lead but that leader is unwilling to divide his responsibilities with another leader.

Here's where a business coach will help leaders and their teams to explicitly take on this system-of-roles conversation—to clarify what roles are missing or ineffective in your organization and to fix them without blowing up your business.

A business coach can help you to evolve your system-of-roles to keep your business growing. The goal is to create a *complete* system-of-roles, in which key roles are played by the right leaders who work interdependently with each other in an effective way. In other words, it is to create those conditions that resolve constraints to growth and make business growth and evolution inevitable.

Consider this scenario:

Growth has stalled in a business. During a performance review with a leadership team, a business coach helps the team determine that the business no longer has a compelling value proposition. As such, the activity of selling is getting harder and costlier. Growth is slowing.

Further, the assigned business leader is currently leading multiple businesses and has not had the time or will to focus separately on fixing this smaller business.

So the coach helps the team to segment the smaller stalled business from the other businesses and to renegotiate responsibilities. A smart and motivated sales leader is promoted to lead the newly segmented business. And performance goals are renegotiated among all of the leaders for each the separate business in the portfolio.

The coach helps the newly minted business leader to formulate her strategy and to present it back to the overall leadership team. The coach helps the team to negotiate protocols to manage real and potential conflicts between businesses. And, the coach helps the new leader develop the mindset and behaviors required to lead her team – a role that she has never played before.

Business coaches can also help leadership teams apply this system-of-roles logic across a range of critical business issues: to succession planning, when one leader needs to replace another; to mergers, when two or more businesses need to be combined; and to divestures, when businesses are sold and need to be extricated from a larger a portfolio. In all of these cases the system-of-roles needs thoughtful and strategic redesign, leaders need to assume new and likely different roles, and tough power issues need to be managed in an open and transparent way.

So, when performance in a business needs to be improved, start by looking at the effectiveness of the roles and interdependencies in that business. But remember, this system-of-roles conversation can be the toughest of all leadership conversations. That is why an experienced business coach may be essential for helping you and your team to navigate it successfully.