

Stuck Organizational Syndrome™

Stuck Organizational Syndrome...what's that? Think of it as a big green monster that has taken over your desk and refuses to budge. No matter how you try to get rid of it – nothing works. Many organizations get stuck on such monster issues that seemingly defy resolution. Examples include dilemmas such as culture clashes after reorganizations, rivalries between peers or workgroups, avoidance of highly emotional issues, lack of alignment, and many others. The result of all of these examples is that they depress performance.

Are these stuck situations going to sit on your desk indefinitely? Must you be office mates with them forever? Dr. Macy suggests that in most cases possible resolution does exist, but we tend to look in the wrong places.

When a leader calls me for assistance with a problem in her/his organization, very often the real problem is far from its original description. A very frequent but hidden issue is what I've dubbed "Stuck Organizational Syndrome."

What's that? Ask around the organization and most people will have a slant on it using different words, but generally adding up to the same issue. Usually "it" is an old issue, one that several people have attempted to resolve in different ways, but "it" seems to have a life of its own and defies resolution.



People, especially the leader, finally give up and accept that "it" is here to stay and there's nothing to be done. "It" goes underground and no one talks about it openly anymore.

Issues that are stuck can be large or small. For example...

- A health care facility I once worked with had an excessive absenteeism rate among employees. It took almost double staffing to keep the required number of staff on the floor at any particular time. Management had tried everything it could think of to resolve the issue – focus groups to ascertain the underlying issue, punishment for those who didn't show up for work, incentives for those who did – nothing worked.

- Several years ago, a colleague of mine, a corporate IT leader, formed a task force to develop a knowledge management policy. To make sure that the various segments of the business were represented, the task force included people from many different locations. After meeting multiple times, the group was at loggerheads. Several dominant options had emerged, each with strong and uncompromising advocates. The IT leader by then had paid travel expenses and time for many people with no result in view. The group was just plain stuck with no resolution in sight.
- A large manufacturing organization, recently merged with a former competitor, brought in a new manager for one of its plants. The new manager came from a highly participative culture whereas the plant had a history of running on a strictly hierarchical structure. The new manager wanted to open up communication among employees and give much more opportunity for participation. The head of engineering went berserk and took a good number of the management team with him. Both hierarchy and participation had advantages and disadvantages, but the management team couldn't bring the issue of structure to a close. They were locked in an endless debate.

What bridges across these examples is the descriptor of stuckness. Each side has valid points and strong advocates. Multiple solutions have been sought. In spite of all good intentions, nothing seems to work.

Therefore, my definition of "Stuck Organizational Syndrome or SOS."

An SOS is an issue or an ineffective pattern of behavior that has persisted over a long time without effective resolution. Or, it can also be a new situation, but it also defies straightforward planning and execution. When issues have been stuck for a long time, then the organization becomes paralyzed in habitual and ineffective ways of dealing with problems. That's when their symptoms form a pattern or a syndrome that diminished the organization's performance.

As a consultant, I watch for symptoms of SOS which often include one or more of the following:

- Issues that no one wants to tackle because they are too emotionally volatile
- Low group morale that has persisted over time for no specifically remembered reason
- Low performance following a major organizational change such as a restructuring or a merger
- Culture clashes after a merger or reorganization
- Unwillingness or perceived unsafety of telling the boss the truth about work situations
- Lack of alignment among levels of organization within a hierarchical chain
- Discord among work peers or work groups
- Unrealistic expectations of management given the resources of the group

What's to be done with these stuck situations? Must we absorb the malaise and downward spiral of energy that come with them?

I say no, we don't have to settle for work cultures that harbor these energy suckers. However, it is true that our usual tactics for trying to dislodge stuck energy don't work. What can we do?

Well, first, let's look at what it is that's stuck. For every person you ask, you're likely to get a bit different opinion. And, that's exactly the issue....what's stuck is the *perceptions* people hold about the problematic issue. In most cases the real knot to be untied is *the set of perceptions behind the issue*, not the issue as it appears on the surface.

I'm reminded of the story of the drunk who had dropped his car keys on a dark night. As he was searching for the keys under the lamppost, a policeman came along and asked him what he was doing. The drunk explained he had dropped his car keys and was searching for them. The policeman asked him where he had dropped the keys. The drunk pointed to his car about 15 feet away from where he had been searching. "Why are you searching over here if you dropped the keys over there by your car?" asked the policeman. "Well," answered the drunk, "this is where the light is."

We're much like the drunk in our attempts to resolve stuck organizational issues. We look where we find some light or where we're familiar with the answer rather than looking where the real issue lies. The bottom line is that the place to look is within the realm of our *perceptions*.

Unfreeze the rigid opinions and perceptions that are held by individuals....those viperous conversations at the coffee pot, the lunch conversations that rehash the issue again and again, the high-pitched exclamations behind closed doors...open those up so that they become equilibrated, so that the disputants see the whole picture instead of just their niche, and then the issues take on a different meaning. That's when new, real solutions become apparent.

* * * Please visit our web site www.macyholdings.com to preview a description of the [SOS Seminar](#). Check back for dates of future seminars. * * *

About D. Beth Macy, Ph.D. – *The common thread throughout Dr. Macy's work history has been change. Throughout most of her work life, she has been a manager or leader dealing with organizations experiencing difficult issues. The types of organizations she has lead, managed or consulted with have varied from small to large, private to public, non-profit to profit, health care to manufacturing. Early in her career, Dr. Macy's curiosity about effective change lead her to achieving masters and doctorate degrees in management focusing on organizational behavior and organizational theory. Developing her own competencies first as a manager and as a leader, she then shifted to her long-time aspiration of coaching and consulting other organizational leaders.*

Dr. Macy can be contacted at bethmacy@macyholdings.com.