

Towards a strategic leadership Molecules of Organizational Behaviour

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Abstract

Leadership is not an inborn characteristic neither can it be directly taught, but is a quality arising from a system of relationships between skills employed within a certain setting.

Rather than describing a priori the skills that a good leader should have, the authors prefer to single them out through their consulting activity, according to the research-intervention method.

In this article, we introduce one of the thus detected skills, that is, the ability to commit tasks.

By means of an 'exemplary' case of commitment from the part of an hyper-controlling boss, we show how to represent its dynamics in a model, detect the change potential within this dynamics and make this change through Strategic Dialogue.

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Antecedent facts in the office

As usual Alberto came into his office with a vague sense of oppression. It was eight o' clock in the morning and an autumn grey light filtered through the half-closed windows. He had had to get up early that morning after a sleepless night. His son Nicola had diabolically “phased” himself with Alberto’s sleeping phases: he started to cry just at the beginning of each REM phase. Alberto seemed to remember that this was a torture in some South American countries.

Nobody was at the office. The coffee-machine glittered at its place while the scent of a hard-discount detergent used the previous night by the cleaning staff still lingered in the air.

Alberto opened his e-mail feeling like a gun artificer opening a suspicious package, or an American politician dealing with a closed envelope during the anthrax period.

The programme opened up in an (apparently) harmless white window. Below, the writing said: 180 inbox messages; 92 unread.

Alberto run the mouse through and realized that his fears were justified, here were the messages he was afraid to find while the answers he wished to read were still missing.

- Here we go again

He said to himself with a sigh.

Laura had been working with him for a year and a half now. Her previous supervisor, Giovanni, was enthusiastic about her and in his words, within a few years she could take over a managing position.

Giovanni’s enthusiasm was shared also by Marina, the General Manager, who had strongly recommended the girl for a promotion in Alberto’s team. And then is when problems had begun.

Before that, he had been able to speak to Laura in various circumstances. And he had thought that she was an alert and clever girl, with a sense of humour too. Also, she was not excessively striking, which in Alberto’s eyes, who had a poor opinion of anyone wearing flashy colours or following the most cheeky fashion, spoke for her seriousness and reliability.

At the beginning, Laura came often to his office and discussed with him about their work. So Alberto had started to commit more important projects to her. Laura was happy about that and used worked hard till late, at least judging by her timesheet.

The problem was that, actually, at a certain point, Alberto had lost track of what exactly Laura was doing. He had to infer the development of her work from the faces of other departments' employees, or from the casual arrival of a message asking for an authorization, complaining about a delay or urging an answer.

In particular, lately these e-mails were filling up his box, and this threw him into despair.

Furthermore, talking to Laura was practically impossible for him: she was doing something, was busy, or when Alberto organized a meeting, often did not attend with some excuse.

Alberto had started to find this situation unnerving. Occasionally he learnt that there were problems within the area that Laura was responsible for, however, since he did not know most of the details, was unable to give adequate answers and was always feeling like a parent who has to justify an escapade.

Also, against his own principles, Alberto had started to do something else: to check on Laura, or better said, to almost spy on her.

He listened "by chance" at her door, tried to read her mail in secret, did everything to be more visible on the work she was doing.

That morning as well, his conviction that committing complex projects to Laura was impossible had been confirmed; something always slipped from her control. Even though at the end the right result was obtained, it was not how Alberto would have wished.

He found in the mail some more requests for explanations coming from the Management Board and still no messages from Laura: nothing at all.

He had arrived early at the office to try to avoid an impending disaster; the European President was coming the following morning and after the last time, two days ago, he had been unable to review his presentation with Laura.

They would surely need to make some more changes and certainly time was not enough.

Utterly discouraged, Alberto started to eat some dry biscuits while writing the first draft of the presentation for the president. He preferred to produce a brand new one rather than running the risk of arriving at the meeting with an inaccurate work.

While he was starting to draw up the presentation plan, he took out his handkerchief to wipe out the sweat from his neck and behind his ears.

- If you want that something is done well you'd better do it yourself ... he commented half-heartedly.

Perhaps Laura would be hurt because of that, but maybe she would understand how the world goes, dear girl!

Leadership: a constructivist perspective

One of the most recurring question in studies about leadership is whether this is an inborn quality or if it can be taught and thus learned.

In line with constructive-cybernetic epistemology which shapes the model we refer to, we introduce a third view according to which leadership certainly is not a gift from nature nor can be taught as a "subject", like maths or physics.

**Leadership is rather the arising quality in a system of interactions
between skills employed within a certain setting**

- leadership is an **arising quality** since it cannot be reduced to a sum of skills (*like the water molecule which has the properties of a liquid, although it is made up of hydrogen and oxygen, which are gases*)
- it arises from a **system of interactions** - that is, from a dynamic combination of those skills
- it is always employed **within a certain setting** and its efficacy cannot be measured outside that setting.

Looking for skills

Our method to single out the skills that turn someone into a leader, is that of **research-intervention**.

Rather than defining a priori which qualities produce a good leader, we prefer to infer them from our consulting activities carried out in companies.

And here we are in agreement with the principle stated by Kurt Lewin according to which: 'if you wish to understand how something works (in our case leadership) you must try and change it'.

Systems dynamics

The discipline that studies System dynamics can help us when we are **shaping into a model** the singled out dynamics.

In the intervention phase this process enables us to:

- graphically represent the **organization** of the observed phenomenon
- identify the **change potential** within any given situation
- select the most effective **techniques** and **stratagems** to act upon change levers
- effectively construct a **Strategic Dialogue** with our Client

In the **research phase**, we may obtain the following advantages:

- identifying **recurring patterns** enabling us to classify the problem on the basis of its dynamics - i.e. avoiding “diagnosis” relating to its content
- devising specific **protocols** for each class of problems and solutions thus singled-out
- being able to measure protocols **effectiveness** (percentage of solved cases) and **efficiency** (solution average time)
- **improving** the intervention model on the basis of the achieved results.

Molecules of organizational behaviour

In an organization system, we define as atom the least observable and meaningful behaviour which cannot be further fragmented.

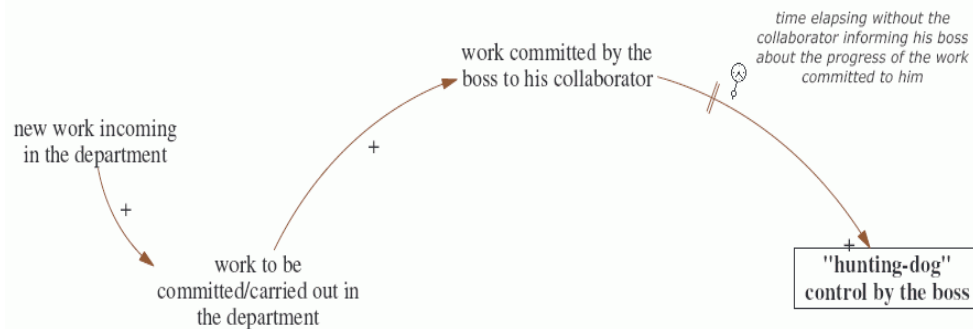
For instance, ‘a boss committing a task to his collaborator’ is an atom.

The molecule is made up of at least two or more atoms linked by a dynamics involving at least one retroaction.

An example of molecule is ‘a boss committing a task to his collaborator’ (behaviour A), ‘the collaborator successfully carries out his/her task within the deadline’ (behaviour B), ‘the boss’ trust in his collaborator increases’ (retroaction of behaviour B on A).

An example: commitment with ‘hunting-dog’ control

The organizational behaviour molecule that we like to call here “commitment with hunting-dog control”, is observed every time a new task is committed to a department whose manager has an “hyper-controlling” attitude. Once the work has arrived in the department, the manager commits it to one or more of his collaborators. They get down to work and, partly due to the time necessary to complete it, partly because they are not as “anxious” as their boss is, they will tend to be “untimely” when informing him about the various projects progress¹.

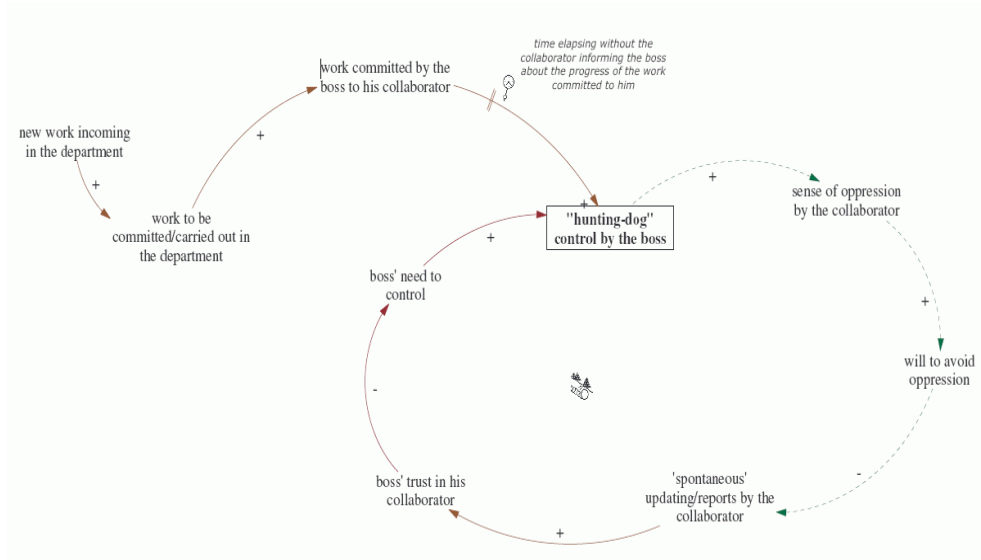


At this point, a vicious circle can lead to two different situations:

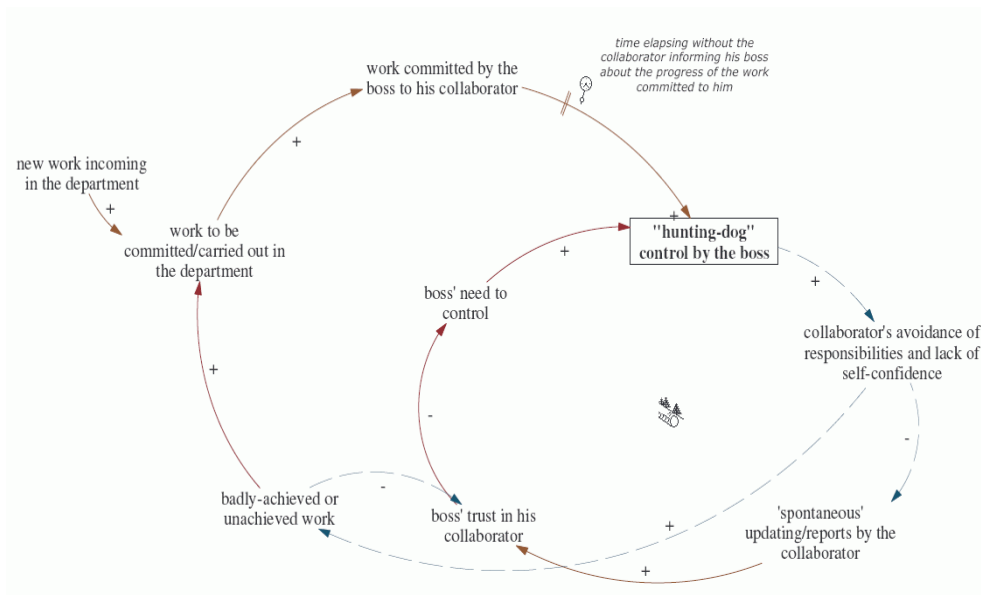
- if the collaborator is a resource aware of his/her own abilities, he/she will tend to feel oppressed and, as a consequence, try to avoid at all costs his/her boss' control. For this reason, he/she will tend to inform his/her boss as little as possible, and with a sort of malicious satisfaction as well. If this behaviour becomes exaggerated, the boss will trust his/her collaborator less and less and this will increase his distressing need to control (see the following pattern).

¹ The formalism that we use when shaping a model is that of system dynamics' (discipline studying system dynamics).

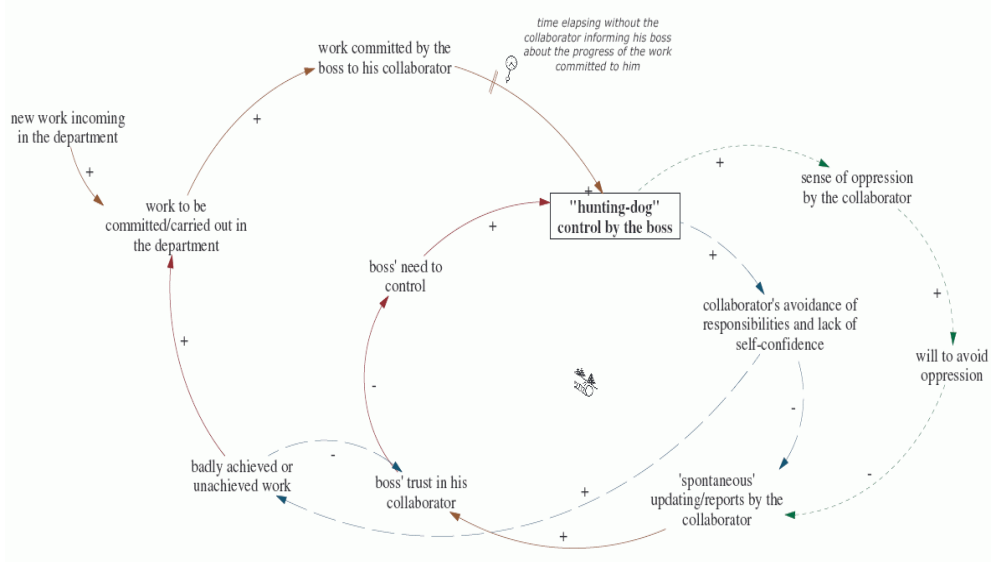
To better understand this formalism, we recommend to read appendix 1 of this article.



- a less self-confident collaborator will tend to avoid responsibilities, maybe thinking: “after all, there is my boss, they don’t need me...” Also this behaviour will lead to a lesser interaction between the collaborator and his/her boss, with the result that, once again, the “hunting-dog boss” will not be able to trust a collaborator of his who is unwilling to inform him!” (see the following pattern)



Should we want to get to the bone of this situation (and, after all, we are talking about “hunting-dogs” here), we could say that the vicious circle feeds upon itself and includes concepts like control and trust. As for any “systemic loop”, knowing whether the boss controls because he lacks trust, or whether he cannot give his trust to anybody for the very reason that he controls too much, continuously increasing his expectations, is not so vital. The impact on organizations is exemplified by an operational “anoxia” which, in extreme cases, could lead to a virtual paralysis. In fact, the paradox here is that such an hyper-controlling behaviour tends to produce low-quality work and very slow progress. Moreover, it is very likely that the relationship between our “hunting-dog boss” and his collaborators will worsen.



If this behaviour molecule is not carefully considered and possibly solved, it risks to produce consequences on other company departments. In fact, the latter could suffer directly because of the poor quality and the delay of the work produced and indirectly because of the quality of the relationships involved.

Strategic Dialogue

Alberto, manager of the customer service in a large-distribution multinational company, is tense and tense. He does not know how to deal with one of his

direct collaborators, Laura. He feels he is at a dead-end. Finally, following a colleague's advice, he turns to a Strategic Consultant.

This professional is a resource who, trained at the Arezzo "Centro di Terapia Strategica", usually works with companies and managers providing them with a series of problem solving tools. Among them, Strategic Dialogue is particularly important. It consists of a set of questions, paraphrases, injunctions, prompts and other communication stratagems proposed to make our Client face his own reality. Dialogue is focused on "how" reality works from the other's point of view - not on "why".

Strategic Dialogue and its set of tools aim at making the other person "feel" things in a different way, from a mostly emotional point of view, thus inducing in him a change of reactions, behaviour and of his perception of himself.

We create a strong emotional experience able to unblock resources which were stuck in rigid and dysfunctional previous perceptions. Here lays the high persuading value of Strategic Dialogue.

The "Strategic" Professional does not know a priori where the dialogue will take both himself and his Client. It is a pathway of knowledge where both participants in the dialogue walk at the same time and where the Client is convinced by his own arguments.

In fact, we could say that, paradoxically, it is the same Client who, through his/her answers, establishes the standard and the rhythm of conversation. Accompanied by the Strategic Professional, he constructs his/her own alternative reality.

Here is the report of their first meeting.

Consultant	"Well, Alberto, why did you turn to me?"	Generic question to understand the problem
Alberto	"I have a problem with one of my collaborators"	
C.	"What kind of problem is it specifically?"	Probing question

- A. “Well... she was assigned to my team some time ago. I was told that she is a very good and competent employee. At the beginning things seemed to be fine, but after some time, problems begun.”
- C. “Are the problems you are referring to related to her work or to the relationship between the two of you?” First Strategic Question, giving the illusion of an alternative
- A. “To both. Our job is a very delicate one. We have to be very attentive towards our customers, take care of the slightest detail and, moreover, always respect our deadlines. At the beginning I had the feeling that Laura was in line with all that, but lately, I am not so sure. I have the feeling that her work is carried out in a superficial way and without the necessary care.”
- C. “Ok, let me see if I have well understood. Laura is one of your collaborators, she is known as a good and competent person but, for some reasons, lately you have not been sure she is in line with your idea of the work. You have the feeling that she is superficial and a little distracted. Is that right?” Paraphrase. We start to introduce the concept that the collaborator is nevertheless efficient
- A. “Just right.”

In this first phase of Strategic Dialogue, the Consultant probes the Manager's world, in order to understand his way of thinking and logics.

Note that the answer to the first real question giving the illusion of an alternative (task or relationship?) starts with "To both" then leading to believe that Alberto sees room for improvement just in the "task" area. This kind of answer is rather frequent: through his questions, the Consultant leads his Client to unveil where the problem really seems to lay. It is the Client himself who is brought to better define the characteristics of a presumably poor performance.

Consultant "So, your change of opinion about her is due to a specific event or to a general evaluation of yours?"

Alberto "To a general evaluation. Obviously, I expect that a responsible person realizes how important is to keep me informed about the project progress with regards to certain critical steps. On the contrary, she seems to be elusive, she does not realize the importance of this aspect and every time I try to get information about what is going on, I have the impression that she is annoyed or gives utterly unsuitable answers!"

C. "Ok, Alberto, it is quite clear how important is **for you** to be updated on the various projects progress. Indeed, this is one of the tasks of a manager.
But this also interests me: do you think that Laura is "elusive" because it is part of her character or as a consequence of the relationship between the two of you ...?"

- A. “I have the feeling that this is really a trait of her personality! Maybe it was fine for her previous supervisor, but for me it is important that things go in a certain way and I am aware that we cannot afford to make mistakes. I think that my collaborator is totally unaware of the risks to which her behaviour expose us.”

Once again Alberto denies with his words that between him and Laura there is an inadequate relationship. The Consultant has tried to introduce in a very indirect way the possibility that it is only Alberto who perceives the problem. From Alberto’s answer it seems that this attempt did not succeed.

- C. “Mmmh... and how does she behave with others? Is she elusive in the same way or is she any different?”
- A research is insinuated to understand if Laura’s behaviour is recognized as disputable by everybody or by the manager only

- A. “Well, now that you make me think about it, actually she is not like this with everybody. I see her chatting with the other colleagues more often and more at ease. I feel that with me she exasperates her behaviour.”

With this question the Consultant starts to be more direct: opposing the perception of “Alberto the manager” to that of “the others” he makes him think for the first time that there could really be a relationship problem between him and Laura. Following the terminology traditionally used in the Arezzo and Giorgio Nardone’s School, the Strategic Consultant is structuring the stratagem “Lead the enemy up to the loft and take away the ladder”. Obviously, here the “enemy” is unaware and in good faith. This is the typical

characteristic of any System - that is, the tendency to oppose whatever may affect its own balance, even if dysfunctional.

Although indirect, the following paraphrase strengthens this point.

Consultant “Fine, this is interesting...I try to sum up, correct me if I am wrong. Laura comes from a previous work experience where she was well evaluated. Now she does not abide as much as you would like to accuracy requirements and she does not update you about the various projects progress. And yet elusiveness does not seem to be one of her absolute peculiarities. Do you agree?”

Alberto “Probably so, yes. Laura is generally considered as a reliable person. But with me she seems to put up a sort of refusal, as if she finds it really hard to let me know what she is doing!”

C. “So, I gather that maybe we are still missing some of what goes on when the two of you interact and, if you agree, I would like to discuss it further. Is that ok?”

A. “If you think that it is useful...”

The Consultant perceives in Alberto a resistance that he may be building up. So, from a “one-down” position he actually asks the manager his permission to go on with the assessment process. The question the Consultant asks, which follows, is able to strengthen even more an alliance aiming at solving the problem afflicting the Manager. Note that the Consultant “skims over” Alberto’s personal responsibility. In fact, he talks about “improving the situation at the office” and “refocusing Laura”, but does not say directly that it is him who should change.

- Consultant "Do you think that understanding how to improve the situation at your office and refocusing Laura in a short time is useful or that it is better to leave things as they are and see if they improve in time?"
- Alberto "Obviously I would like to find a quick solution!..."
- C. "Alberto, in your opinion is Laura a competent person aware of her value or an incompetent resource?"

Now that he has introduced the concept that there could be a relationship problem between the Manager and his collaborator, the Consultant somehow gets back to his very first question, the one about "task or relationship", focusing on the perception that Laura has of herself and of her abilities to carry out well her committed tasks. Here the idea is to weave on the "trap" that a person aware of her value does not like to be controlled too much.

- Alberto "At the beginning, when she arrived in my department, there were many things she did not know. But after a while and I have to admit rather quickly- she understood how things worked and did her best. And she carried out an awful amount of work too. So, I presume that she believes to be quite competent. But this is not the point: the point is that ... being competent is not enough! It is also vital keeping me updated, especially about the most important projects!"
- C. "This is understandable... and, in your experience, the projects that you follow in your department need some time to be carried out or are quickly completed?"

- A. “Of course we need some time. This is why providing me with information about a project from start to end is even more important. Otherwise, we risk that weeks elapse without me knowing what happens. Then someone may ask me... and I don’t know what to say!”

Once again a sort of resistance surfaces, also made worse by Alberto’s attempt to involve possible accomplices: those who “may ask”. In this case, making use of a paraphrase is also useful to relieve tension before it builds up too much.

- C. “Ok, I try to sum up: your projects need some time to be completed and you want to be constantly updated about their progress. Laura, even though she is competent and hard working, seems somehow reluctant to comply with your way of working. Is this all?”

- A. “Yes, definitely.”

- C. “...And, in your opinion, the fact that she does not keep you posted about the project progress indicates that the work continues the same as it should, thanks to Laura’s competence, or that, on the contrary, there is a problem here?”

The dialogue becomes more pressing. By means of the previous question the Consultant wants to make the Manager think that, even if he is not informed, work goes on well anyway.

- Alberto “I don’t know... You see, the problem is that, as her supervisor, I receive in copy reminders and messages for her but I never find her answers. In the end everything turns out well, or so it seems ... but, in the mean time, I find myself in a very difficult situation.”

- C. “I realize that it is not easy for you... and for this very reason let me understand something else. After your last answer I am curious to know if Laura generally deserves to be trusted by others or not...”
- A. “(silence) Apparently she does. Even when I don’t see her answers then I gather that she has probably spoken directly or on the phone with our customer ...”
- C. “...and on the basis of this latter cue do you think that Laura deserves your trust or not?”

The “knot” is tightening and the Consultant builds up tension to pave the way for the metaphor and making it more effective.

- Alberto “But we are not discussing this here. It is better for her too that I am in the know ... it is also in her interest, isn’t it?”
- C. “I see, Alberto. You know, this situation makes me think of a thoughtful father that, for her own good, continues to treat his adult daughter like a kid needing his care and control. And, as a result, his adult daughter, for the very reason that she knows how to do things, tends to perceive more lack of confidence than love and will tend to run away...”

Thanks to strategic questions, the Consultant constructs a metaphor having “isomorphic” characteristics with the situation outlined. Further, he is lucky since he discovers from Alberto’s next answer that he has really hit the mark and that Alberto the manager lives a similar situation also in his family.

- Alberto “Ah... I understand! Actually, I have an adolescent daughter who is a bit like this. We try to follow her, to understand her ... it is only normal for a parent to be worried. But she says that we want to control her and gets mad, she hides things from us, mostly silly things...
...Maybe you are right, perhaps it is just because Laura feels controlled that she runs away!”
- C. “I think that you are really right here! Now what do you think would be best doing: working as usual and keep on asking Laura reports, in a way that she apparently perceives as distressing, or leaving her room to manage her work and give you feedbacks -maybe previously agreed upon by the two of you- so that she feels that she is well considered by you thanks to her abilities?”

The Consultant pushes his point further. He is not satisfied with the mere acceptance of the metaphor, but makes sure that the Manager takes it upon himself to do his best to arrive at a definite solution of the problem. Once again the Consultant does not suggest anything but, through the question with illusion of an alternative, leaves it up to the Customer to “decide and do”.

- Alberto “Well... maybe it could be most effective if between us we find a way to update me regularly that is acceptable by both, also in terms of time interval ... in other words, not as it happens now!”
- C. “Good!! The solution you found seems really excellent to me! And what sort of time interval do you think can be acceptable for both of you?”
- A. “Well... maybe the beginning and the end of the week, so I could have my say on scheduling and verify the project status at the end....”

- C. “Ok Alberto... and what exactly will you ask Laura?”
- A. “I will fix for us two one-hour meetings and ask her to provide me with an update of the projects’ progress on Monday morning and on Friday before lunch. What do you reckon?”

The Consultant definitely assigns the “ownership” of the solution to his Client, giving him all the credit for it and congratulating him on this. However, the Consultant does not let go of Alberto until he is definitely sure, at least by what he says, that a specific goal, measurable and with a deadline (S.M.A.R.T.²) - which the Manager has to pursue- has been fixed.

- C. “Excellent Alberto! Knowing Laura, will this be enough to refocus her in the team you manage or is there still anything else that might improve her performance?”
- A. “Right now nothing else comes to my mind ... anyway, it would be better for me if I could see more written documents!”
- C. “You know, step by step things will go more and more the way you want... When you know how to obtain the best from your resources they too comply more with your managing attitude. Very good!!! I think that you have done an excellent job and the idea of "scheduling and regulating" activities control is really a good initiative...”
- A. “I truly hope it will be so!”

At the end of the consultation the basic idea is that to modify a System we need to introduce very small changes that do not distort it but, on the contrary, enrich it with possibilities by making use of its own logic. At the end of the

² The acronym helps us to remember qualities that a “well defined” goal should have. The letters stand for: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**greed, **R**eachable, **T**ime constrained

session, Alberto has yet to definitely achieve his goal, but is more relaxed and able to usefully handle the situation.

After a month there was a follow-up session with Alberto. He reported that things were really improving with Laura. Occasionally, he becomes aware that he is still getting anxious but is starting to think that it might be a personal trait of his.

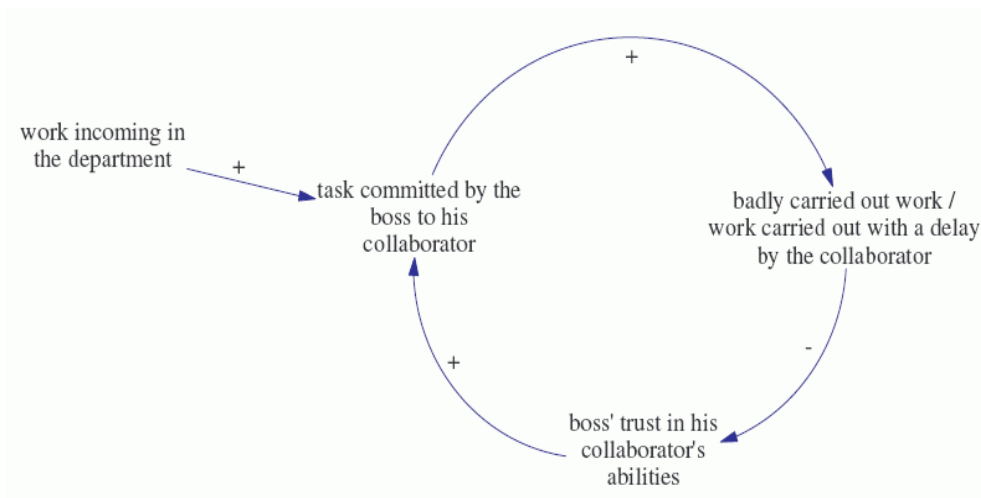
The above-reported Dialogue ensues from a direct experience of the authors. As always, after conducting every Strategic Dialogue, if one could mentally rewind the tape of his/her intervention, probably to obtain the same result some other ways to do things and ask questions would be discovered. The value of this model lays in its very shapeability. Further, no written word can suitably recall the sensations and emotions it is full of.

“The silkworm spins its cocoon and remains inside it, trapped; the spider weaves its web and remains outside of it, free.”
Chinese proverb.

Appendix 1: formalism

System dynamics representation follows a formalism which, with few exceptions, is now shared by the whole Academic world and is implemented in the different support and simulation software.

In the below-reported diagram we describe it in a limited way only with the aim of better understanding this article.



There are some **variables** in the diagram (incoming work, committed task, carried out work, boss' trust) and some **interactions** between them (arrow lines).

The interactions indicate how a variable **affects** the other. For example, the work incoming in the department has an impact on the tasks committed by the boss.

The + or – Symbols indicate **how** variables are mutually **correlated** and, more precisely

- + means that when one of them increases, the other increases too and when one decreases, the other decreases too (**direct correlation**)
- – means that when one of them increases, the other one decreases, and, vice versa, when one decreases the other one increases (**inverse correlation**)

Taking these conventions into consideration, let us read the molecule now.

The more work is incoming to the department, the more tasks are committed by the boss to his collaborator (we are assuming that the boss is used to commit).

The more tasks are committed to the collaborator, the more work is badly carried out or finished with a delay by him (we are assuming that the collaborator is unable to carry out his committed task or has an excessive work load).

So, as more work is badly completed, the boss trusts less and less his collaborator (note the inverse correlation).

Since trust is directly correlated (+) to the tasks committed by the boss, if the first decreases, the committed tasks will decrease accordingly (**observe carefully the sign between each couple of variables which - we repeat – refers only to the way they affect each other and does not represent the status of the whole system³**).

³ Therefore, this interpretation would be **wrong**: as tasks increase, badly executed or delayed work increases too, which causes a decrease of trust and, consequently, **an increase in the committed tasks**.

Actually, a growing decrease in trust leads to fewer committed tasks since the interaction between these two variables is **direct** and, as one of them decreases, the other decreases too.

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