

This article first appeared in the July 2009 edition of the Quarterly Member Newsletter of International Association for Information & Data Quality. The IAIDQ is the world's leading not-for-profit Professional Association for Information Quality professionals, founded in 2004 and engaged in taking the profession to greater heights through an industry wide, vendor-neutral certification program. Be a part of the IQ revolution. Join us. Membership benefits include access to a treasure of Data Quality related knowledge base, access to thought leadership from multiple Data Quality experts in the form of thought provoking articles, webinars, book summaries and opportunities to engage in lively professional discussions. Full details about the Association and what they do can be found on the [IAIDQ website](#).

## Power, Politics, and Partnership in Information Quality Initiatives

By  
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*To be successful in information and data quality initiatives, system sight should be one of your key competencies.*

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SYSTEMS THINKING

The information and data quality world is dominated by the word “systems.” We have source systems, operational systems, information quality systems, database systems, application systems, data warehouse systems, reporting systems, analytic systems, and business intelligence systems. However, the “system” that tends to be most misunderstood and challenging for most people is the organizational “system” that we live in.

In her book “*Leadership and the New Science*”, Margaret Wheatley writes: “Each of us lives and works in organizations designed from Newtonian images of the universe. Our assumptions come to us from seventeenth century physics, from Newtonian mechanics. But the science has changed. If we are to continue to draw from the sciences to create and manage organizations, then we need to at least ground our work in the science of our times. We need to stop seeking the universe of the seventeenth century and begin to explore what became known to us in the twentieth century.”

As Margaret Wheatley points out, we tend to see our organizations through the mental model of a machine. In fact, we use a bill of materials structure or hierarchy to typically depict the relationships between the parts...the standard org chart. We need new ways to understand and manage the organizations we are in – the new discipline that Peter Senge from M.I.T. refers to in *The Fifth Discipline*.

Senge defines five core *lifelong* programs for study and practice and one of them is systems thinking. His definition of systems thinking is: “a way of thinking about, and a language for describing and understanding, the forces and interrelationships that shape the behavior of systems. This discipline helps us see how to change systems more effectively, and to act more in tune with the larger processes of the natural and economic world.”

This is easier said than done. See the bigger picture? Understand the interrelationships? Modify our mental model? Explore a new science? Change the system? Many people in business organizations and information quality initiatives would run fast and far away from that challenge. My friend Barry Oshry, has not. His 35 years of research, observations, teaching, and writing have embraced these questions and have had a profound impact on me. I have become a student of his

approach, a teacher of his framework, and a raving Barry fan. Information quality organizations would do well to learn some lessons from Barry.

### **BARRY OSHRY'S POWER LAB**

I attended Oshry's Power Lab in 2002 and that experience has influenced me more than any other learning opportunity I have had in my career. The Power Lab features a **total immersion experience** involving a three-class community with distinct differences in wealth and power. Participants are "born" into one of the three classes.

In this setting all the critical issues of power and leadership emerge clearly, and participants are confronted with these head on. Here participants get to take a good look at their usual ways of handling these issues, explore new approaches, and test their limits. It is this total immersion experience that plays a key role in creating the lasting learning of The Power Lab.

My experience felt like a combination of Survivor, The Apprentice, The Office, and The Stanford Prison Experiment. It was intense, exhausting, funny, frightening, and powerful. And the lessons have stuck with me for the last seven years. One key insight that became clear to me was that most, if not all, organizations and leaders need help with system sight. Specifically, information quality organizations struggling with silos, finger-pointing, conflicting priorities, ineffective governance, and inadequate stewardship can benefit from developing system sight in order to improve their effectiveness.

Thus, we adapted Oshry's framework and created the Power, Politics, and Partnership (PP&P) workshop as a means to teach system sight to business and IT groups. In fact, we were thrilled when our PP&P workshop received the highest ranking at the 2008 Information and Data Quality Conference produced by IAIDQ. There is no substitute for the real experience, but the key lessons warrant discussion for leaders that want to gain system sight.

### **THE POWER, POLITICS, AND PARTNERSHIP WORKSHOP**

In our PP&P workshop, we create an organization among the people that attend (18-50 participants) and make some of them "**Tops**" with overall responsibility, some "**Bottoms**" that do the work of the organization, some "**Customers**," and some "**Middle Managers**." We create some inequity in the system (like real organizations) and then give the participants five twelve-minute days to complete their projects. We then periodically debrief their experiences of their role/space and watch the human system patterns unfold.

In approximately twenty minutes, the dysfunctional patterns appear that most people recognize in their own organizations. Those patterns relate to power, empowerment, cross functional collaboration, customer satisfaction, and/or the lack of all of those things. The rest of the program then uses this experience as a case study to explore these predictable patterns and strategies for improving interactions at all levels.

Barry Oshry says it best when he summarizes: "Generally, if we are paying attention, we know what life is like for us in our part of the system. Other parts of the system are, for the most part, invisible to us. We do not know what others are experiencing, what their worlds are like, what issues they are dealing with, what dilemmas they are facing, what stresses they are undergoing.

And what makes matters worse, sometimes we think we do know when, in fact, we do not. We have our beliefs, myths and prejudices, which we accept as the truth and which form the bases of our actions. This blindness to other parts of the system – which we call spatial blindness – is a source of considerable misunderstanding and conflict.”

**LESSONS LEARNED**

With insight comes the possibility of transforming the way we play our roles as Tops, Bottoms, Middles, and Customers, thereby reducing the negative, disempowering patterns that are so predictable they can be re-created in twenty minutes with any group of individuals.

We focus less on "doing" things differently than on "being" different in these roles.

The table below summarizes the typical dysfunctional patterns and the alternative stands that lead to empowerment.

Predictable Conditions	Predictable Responses	Familiar Disempowering Scenarios	Empowerment Stand
Top Overload	Suck it Up	Burdened	Be a Top Who Creates Responsibility Throughout the Organization
Bottom Disregard	Hold “THEM” Responsible	Oppressed	Be a Bottom Who is Responsible for His/Her Condition in the System and for the Condition of the System
Middle Crunch	Slide to the Middle	Torn	Be a Middle Who Stays out of the Middle, and who Maintains His/Her Independence of Thought and Action
Customer Neglect	Hold “THEM” Responsible for Delivery	Righteous Victim	Be a Customer Who Gets in the Middle of the Delivery Processes and Helps Them Work for You

Table 1. Typical dysfunctional patterns and the Empowerment stands that address them.

The “**Top**” who creates responsibility in the system will be more effective than the Top who takes on more and more responsibility for system success. The “**Bottom**” or individual contributor will be more successful and satisfied if he or she is willing to be proactive and take responsibility for solving problems they encounter rather than waiting for “higher-ups” to fix them. “**Middles**” who stay out of the middle of others’ issues and conflicts and maintain their independence of thought and action will be more effective than Middles who focus solely on trying to please their varied constituencies. Finally, business “**Customers**” (internal or external) who get involved early in the delivery process and make sure it delivers what they really need are much more likely to be satisfied than those who stand aloof from the delivery system and expect it to deliver to them.

These are not trivial choices and they lead us into fundamentally different organizational experiences.

Information quality initiatives are complex, cross-functional programs that involve multiple departments, multiple levels, multiple technologies, and multiple personalities.

Those looking for simple answers to these organizational issues will be continually frustrated. However, one of the key actions within our control is to better understand how to navigate the organizational system and improve our own behaviors. System sight is one of the key levers for our organizational learning and effectiveness. Add system sight to your list of key competencies to be successful in information and data quality.

## REFERENCES

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## About the Author



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Maureen also participates on the Data Warehousing Advisory Board for The Daniels College of Business at the University of Denver. She has been on the faculty of The Data Warehousing Institute (TDWI) since 1997 and regularly consults, writes, and teaches on organizational and leadership issues related to information technology and business. Maureen can be reached at [mclarry \[at\] connectknowledge \[dot\] com](mailto:mclarry@connectknowledge.com) or by phone at +1 (303) 730-7171.

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