



# Leadership Skills Accelerate Logistics Productivity in the **RELATIONSHIP AGE**

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Recently, I was called in to support an organization in forging a collaboration between the marketing and research departments when new products were rolled out. The leaders of these two departments had a history of banging heads.

Oftentimes, marketing would recommend that the company kill a new product because it was taking too long to develop. Research would typically ignore this recommendation in the pursuit of pure science. There was no collaboration, but ample amounts of conflict.

A group of seven team managers in charge of new products, the heads of the marketing and research departments, and I had been working hard to establish protocols and set individual goals within the larger organizational goal. My challenge was to focus everyone's attention on the overall goal whenever conflict would arise.

During one of the early sessions, when I entered the conference room, the tension was so thick, it was suffocating. I decided it was time to put the issue of non-collaboration and its adverse impact on the goal on the table. "Would it be helpful to check in on where we are with our broader goals?" I began.

Before anyone could reply, Frank, the CEO's right-hand man, looked up at the ceiling exasperatedly, sarcastically sighed, then barked, "I don't even know what the goal is anymore!" He then turned to the VP on his left, and, almost as loudly, petulantly declared, "This is all just a huge waste of time."

There was a sinking feeling in the room, a bleak silence, then a feeling of wanting to launch a counterattack. Why was this person so resistant to collaboration? You could also sense the other meeting participants withdrawing into themselves.

How many times a week does this scenario—or one like it—happen at your company? How much precious time is lost stewing over difficult situations such as when someone is publicly or privately sabotaging your best efforts? How much energy is devoted to getting these people back, going around them, attempting to win them over, or just giving up? Not to mention all the on-the-job stress these situations generate.

## **NEGATIVE WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS PAD PRODUCTIVITY COSTS**

An informal survey we recently conducted revealed that relationship and communications challenges (in-fighting, office politics, dismissing ideas, badmouthing others) typically added 40 to 70% to the level of effort necessary to execute any given task.

This statistic is borne out by Seattle psychologist Brian DesRoches who found that these kinds of workplace dramas routinely waste up to 50% of workers' time. Energy consumed in addressing difficult situations represents energy that isn't available for creativity, innovation, and problem solving.

In today's fast-paced global environment, organizations can no longer afford to pay this price. Addressing these relationship challenges authentically, effectively, and systematically is the new frontier in business productivity.

Making the transition from blaming others for a problem to taking responsibility for learning emotionally-based leadership skills is not for the faint of heart—it's challenging. But these are skills we must develop.

We predict that by the year 2020, when the Relationship Age is fully upon us, not knowing how to gracefully and easily address these challenges will be like trying to function in today's Information Age environment without knowing how to type.

We've identified three levels of cultural awareness within logistics organizations and organizations-at-large (the *Right-Wrong Culture*, the *Learning Culture*, and the *Culture of Accelerated Productivity*), and three models for addressing this kind of challenge.

This **three-part series** will focus on these three levels of workplace awareness, the behaviors that surface within each level, how behavioral dynamics within each level negatively impact productivity, and what action steps a company can take to systemically move productivity to the next level.

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## THE FIRST CULTURE WE'LL TALK ABOUT IS THE RIGHT-WRONG CULTURE

The Right-Wrong Culture is the least productive of the three, and also the most prevalent in business today. It's held in place by the following beliefs and related assumptions:

1. If something isn't going well, or if I'm upset for any reason, then someone or something is to blame, and they are (or it is) bad or wrong. I need to find out what's wrong and make sure it doesn't happen again.
2. The more senior level you are in an organization, the more experience you have and the broader your perspective is. Therefore, it's more likely you can assess what's good and right (or bad and wrong) for the organization.
3. There's a penalty for not doing what's right, making mistakes, not learning from mistakes, or stepping out of line. The penalty is adverse consequences, like loss of reputation, promotion, bonus, or even employment.

As a result of these beliefs and assumptions, fear and control underlie the Right-Wrong Culture. This is easy to understand, as we want organizations to operate effectively, minimize errors, make effective decisions, and avoid the penalties of "mistakes." However, using fear and control to achieve these ends creates collateral damage in that the following behaviors (which interfere with productivity) tend to proliferate in a Right-Wrong Culture:

1. **Blaming.** We find it necessary to point the finger in another direction when a mistake has been made to avoid penalty to ourselves.
2. **Withholding ideas.** Voicing creative ideas is risky in this environment. The ideas might be viewed as "wrong."
3. **Lowered enthusiasm.** Buy-in is correlated with participation, and in a command and control—or Right-Wrong Culture—there's a tendency to just do what I'm told.
4. **Withholding support.** In order to garner support from certain individuals, I withhold support from other individuals to curry their favor.
5. **Complaining.** Since there is very little I can do about what is "wrong," I soothe my resentment by complaining.
6. **Politics.** I must align myself to the people in the "in" group to succeed in the organization. There are winners and losers. This produces competition (instead of collaboration) between individuals.
7. **Hasty decisions.** Decisions are often dictated quickly from on high, and the rest of the organization cynically interprets these edicts as the "flavor of the month."
8. **Compliance.** Fear is the go-to method for gaining compliance.

In the Right-Wrong Culture, revisiting the "Frank" situation on the previous page, I would blame Frank and make him the "bad" guy. I'd wonder, "What is his problem? He's being a jerk. And he's certainly not doing anything to help us get the job done." I'd also feel angry, hurt, and resentful. I'd probably withdraw into silence, lick my wounds, and look for a way to secretly get back at him. Alternatively, I might attack him outright, or look to have others influence his behavior.

For some folks, the strategy for dealing with a Frank-type situation is to blame themselves and, in essence, become the "bad" guy. Maybe they convince themselves that a comment they made earlier set the whole sordid scenario up. They may ponder, "Why on earth did I do that? I should have known better! I'm going to blow it if I don't be more careful."

They might also feel embarrassed or ashamed, and withdraw into silence, hoping no one will notice them. Or, they might attempt to recover by flattering their colleague and trying to get back on his or her good side.

But all of this counterproductive behavior has consequences. For one, Frank doesn't know about all of your inner battle strategies, but he'll sense the separation between you. This will only serve to strengthen his position. Others will be aware of the low-grade warfare you're waging, and they'll either try to smooth things over, stay out of the way, or choose sides.

Another challenging situation in a Right-Wrong Culture is to have your ideas ignored or turned down. This can lead to discouragement, participating at a lower level of energy, withdrawal, or even despondency. It can also lead to becoming bull-headed, repeating your rejected idea(s) at every opportunity and insisting you be heard.

An even more challenging situation in a Right-Wrong Culture is the perception that a key senior manager could make or break your career. Encounters with him or her are risky and nerve-racking. This fearful preoccupation could waste a considerable amount of your time and energy by imagining a variety of encounters with them—all disastrous.

Each of the above situations robs employees of time, energy and enthusiasm. Wrestling with negative workplace dramas reduces creativity, innovation, enthusiasm, productivity, and effectiveness. Unproductive behaviors are so rampant in a Right-Wrong Culture that we hardly see them for what they truly are. Most of us conclude that this is "just the way it is" in business today, and nothing can be done about it.

## PART II

*In Part II, we'll discuss the Learning Culture in which a different set of beliefs, behaviors, and skills empower individuals to more successfully address behaviors that interfere with productivity.*

However, a focus on productivity requires that we learn how to address these kinds of situations. For example, let's set a goal in a logistics function to reduce costs by 10%, or improve customer service to a 98% fill rate. Productivity can be defined as the time, resources, and stress required to achieve that goal. If emotional dramas add 50% to what is required in reaching that goal, it will take us *twice* as long to achieve the desired goal—consuming double the manpower hours, or resources, and end up being two times as stressful as necessary.

To raise productivity in logistics organizations dramatically (say, by 30 to 70%, or more), we need to view unproductive behaviors as one of the keys to the solution. We need to ask ourselves, “What skill or quality, if developed to the next level, would enable me to handle this challenge more gracefully and easily?”

This view will begin to point us in the direction of more creatively and purposefully addressing these negative behaviors. We replace our right-wrong consciousness with a learning consciousness. This shift in our view makes learning easier, and we are ready to move to a new level of productivity: **Learning Consciousness**.

In this, the Relationship Age, we are redefining productivity to mean the “grace and ease” with which aggressive goals are attained. As you develop ambitious goals for your logistics organization, keep in mind that any idea or behavior that reduces work hours and costs, or lessens stress...raises productivity. This is desirable! Any behavior that adds time, resources, and stress in the process of realizing goals...lowers productivity. This is simply not good business practice. ■

In Part II of our three-part series on *Logistics Leadership Skills Accelerate Productivity in the Relationship Age*, we talk about the Learning Culture. In this environment, the automatic thought pattern when faced with a challenging or difficult situation is, “Aha! Now I'm in for some extraordinary new learning!” This attitude accomplishes one thing—it makes learning easier. And the more we learn, the more productive our on-the-job behavior becomes.

### BUT HOW DO WE GET THERE?

Shifting from a Right-Wrong Culture to a Learning Culture requires surrendering our right-wrong attitudes about encounters with others at work. This can prove to be challenging for many of us.

The right-wrong attitude is a defense mechanism that protects us (we think) from failure, embarrassment, rejection, and criticism. (If someone attacks our ideas as “bad,” we push back because we don't want to experience failure, etc.) We mistakenly believe that this behavior will help us avoid uncomfortable experiences and achieve approval, prestige, control, and economic safety. And, maybe even a few moments in the spotlight.

When we view someone (or something) as wrong, our attitude demonstrates that we are against him or her (or it) in order to “right the wrong.” This kind of behavior is often perceived as being competitive, resistant, controlling, passive, and defensive. These behaviors ultimately are judged as “wrong” by our co-workers who, in turn, behave the same way with us.

All of this workplace resistance creates a kind of collateral damage that hinders

successful results and increased productivity by consuming more resources than necessary, and creating more stress. To paraphrase R. Buckminster Fuller, we cannot implement change by resisting what's happening, so rather than judging the Right-Wrong Culture as “bad,” we can use it to learn how to handle “even this” with grace and ease.

I was recently having a telephone conversation with Ralph, a VP in charge of change management at a pharmaceutical company undergoing a merger. Ralph was getting to know the executives in the new organization, and was dismayed about the cultural differences he perceived between the two companies. He was becoming more and more pessimistic about the chances for a smooth integration, and disillusioned about the opportunity to incorporate best practices in the newly-merged company.

My comments—intended to encourage him—seemed to have just the opposite effect, deepening his despair. I was frustrated by my inability to help him make a positive attitude adjustment, and was tempted to end the call right then and there, thus avoiding any further damage to our relationship.

But, by staying in tune with myself (my thoughts and emotions coupled with my professional experience), and practicing some inner coaching (“I don't have to know what to say, I am *learning* what to say.”), I was able to manage my emotions enough to stop making Ralph “wrong” and become an effective supporter. The key was honesty and a willingness to learn how to handle the situation effectively.

“My concern is that I'm pushing you too far right now,” I offered. “I know it's very stressful for you at work right now, and I don't want to pile on more than you can handle. If I tell you what I'm really thinking, I'm afraid you'll back off.” Openly sharing my feelings of vulnerability with Ralph (and moving out of my comfort zone) instantly created an honest, authentic dialogue between the two of us.

Ralph replied slowly, but firmly: “No, I want you to be honest with me. What are you really thinking? I *want* to hear your ideas. I want you to feel like you can discuss anything with me, but at the same time, I need it to be okay to be able to express my feelings of discouragement to you when I’m experiencing them.”

The willingness for both of us to want to learn allowed learning to take place. Ralph acknowledged the value of the honest communication occurring between us, and we were able to discuss what steps he could take to create a greater level of honest communication within his entire department.

From my vantage point, I learned how to be more aware of when I was judging another’s emotional experience as “bad.” I also learned that I needed to refrain from deeming *myself* as “bad” when I didn’t immediately know how to connect with someone else’s trying experience.

In the Learning Culture, there are no mistakes, only wins and learning opportunities. Even though my phone conversation with Ralph didn’t feel like a win at first, it was most definitely a valuable learning opportunity which evolved into a great win. The conversation could have gone in a different direction. Instead of opening up, Ralph could have bristled at my response, creating an opportunity for me to develop other skills, such as how to handle someone who was on edge and not receptive to learning.

The shift from the Right-Wrong Culture to the Learning Culture happens in moments like these. When we acknowledge our underlying fears of failure and rejection, then release those fears, we can be more honest in addressing difficult workplace situations. We need to challenge ourselves to turn situations like these into learning opportunities. This shift is central in the Learning Culture, which makes learning a lot easier.

## LEARNING CULTURE BELIEFS

As in the Right-Wrong Culture, there are commonly held beliefs in a Learning Culture that support and sustain it. Here are the four basic ones:

- 1. THERE ARE NO MISTAKES, ONLY WINS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING.** If something isn’t going well, or if I’m upset, these are unique opportunities to learn things that will enable me to proceed to the next level of productivity. Labeling an experience a “mistake” is not a “mistake,” but it will make learning more difficult.
- 2. EVERYONE AT WORK IS MY PEER...WE JUST PERFORM DIFFERENT FUNCTIONS.** When there is a difference of opinion among co-workers and decisions need to be made, the most productive way to achieve this is to focus on a shared goal and exchange information, assumptions, ideas, data, and perspectives on how to reach that goal. This method works better than simply deferring to one person’s opinion or running others over with an idea.
- 3. EMOTIONAL UPSET AT WORK IS A KEY TO INCREASING PRODUCTIVITY.** Rather than fearing or avoiding emotional upset, it’s okay to experience these emotions. (This is different than “acting out” upset emotions.) Upset emotions alert us to the fact that we are making someone or something bad/wrong, and they open the door to more clarity about the fear or concern that is present. These are the situations that allow us to perfect our ability to maintain a Learning Culture, regardless of what’s happening around us.
- 4. WILLINGNESS TO LEARN MAKES LEARNING EASIER.** There is always a way to do anything with a greater degree of grace and ease, so we are all just learning to advance to the next level of effectiveness in everything we do.

In the Learning Culture, we sometimes need to slow down in order to speed up because learning a new skill is often initially a difficult process. It takes time to become brutally honest with ourselves in order to understand what’s really going on in certain situations. But, like learning how to type, the consistent practice of new skills enables us to outpace our prior not-as-effective methods of operating.

*Postscript:* Ralph and his team eventually implemented the Learning Culture and doubled their on-the-job productivity. They were recognized by their combined companies for demonstrating “best practice” in collaborative leadership, which led to assignments in key leadership positions. The end result of Ralph’s corporate dilemma was a positive outcome for this diligent group of executives who had worked courageously to learn challenging new relationship skills...including the willingness to collaborate even when others are not. ■



# The Path to Corporate Nirvana

## PART III

In Part III, we discuss the Culture of Accelerated Productivity in which a different set of beliefs, behaviors, and skills empower individuals to further elevate their productivity.

# The Path to Corporate Nirvana: An Enlightened Approach to Accelerated Productivity

In Part III, the final article in our three-part series on logistics leadership skills, we turn our attention to the Culture of Accelerated Productivity. This is a workplace culture in which creative solutions to challenges appear effortlessly and gracefully, and quantum leaps in productivity are the norm.

The Culture of Accelerated Productivity flows out of the Learning Culture, which we discussed at length in the last issue of CLM's *Logistics Comment*. In the learning stage of growth in productivity, we often need to slow down in order to speed up. It takes time to learn and master new skills to address the new-found awareness that emanates from an attitude of "there are no mistakes, only wins and learning opportunities."

After the challenging journey through the Learning Culture, we become practiced at moving outside our comfort zones, willing to understand what upsets us in the workplace, and desire to develop new skills for handling the upset emotions inside of us. We also become more willing to risk experimenting with new skills that address challenges with others more effectively.

As we do this, a lot less workplace upset happens, and if/when an occasional storm whips up, it's often short lived. We trust that any problem that surfaces presents itself as a learning opportunity, therefore, we spend less time in turmoil about it. This frees up a great deal of energy which translates directly into increased creativity and productivity. An almost magical ability to find solutions to challenges emerges, and moments of synchronicity and connection become the norm.

One such extended magical moment occurred recently within a large organization. My colleagues and I had been working with a high-level executive team in the company for 12 months. Each individual on the team (and the team as a whole) had worked through the Right-Wrong Consciousness and the Learning Consciousness Levels.

They had made the relationship skills their own and had become a highly-effective, highly-functioning collaborative team. Their shared goal of becoming the best company in their industry at bringing new products to market had become more important to them than their own individual agenda, and they called this their "Big C" goal.

Then another larger organization made a takeover offer to shareholders. The bid was accepted and the team was faced with an impending merger which would make the company the third largest in its industry. Instead of allowing fear to be a factor and conjuring up frightening future fantasies (like asking themselves, "What's going to happen to me? Will I lose my job? What's going to happen to my family?"), the team stayed focused and embraced the news of the merger as an opportunity to learn how to ascend to the next level of effectiveness.

After the initial shock of the impending merger wore off, these astute employees began to imagine how they could leverage the merger for the benefit of the Big C. Instead of wandering aimlessly from office to office seeking out the latest corporate rumor, they remained focused on products under development so as not to lose momentum.



When the vice president who headed up the team was moved out of his position, the group faced a challenge: all three individuals on the team were being considered for the promotion. The temptation naturally arose for the three members to become competitive with one another. After all, this was about survival!

The skill level of the three individuals was so developed that they were able to honestly open up about their desire to compete with one another, saying things like: “It’s hard to collaborate with someone I am competing with for a job,” and “I find myself feeling suspicious about how you are going about positioning yourself for the head job.”

In the end, the three individuals proposed taking over the leadership of the department as a triumvirate in order to take their collaboration skills to the next level. This management arrangement continued for six months during which time their ability to make decisions effectively together rose exponentially.

The three executives caught the eye of everyone in the new company for their abilities to motivate their team and stay

focused on the work at hand. As a result, their career options increased significantly because of their group performance. All of them were offered the job of leading the department—each one turned the offer down for an even better position.

What distinguished this team from others and propelled them into the third level of productivity was their dedication to their shared goal to become more collaborative and productive as team members, and to reach the Big C, using everything, including a merger, to advance that goal.

The consensus was that if the C-level executives of the organization had had the opportunity to learn, adopt, and institutionalize these challenging skills, there likely would have been no takeover at all.

### **BELIEFS WHICH SUPPORT THE CULTURE OF ACCELERATED PRODUCTIVITY**

1. The way to address office politics is by establishing a shared goal. This is accomplished by discovering what goal is shared.
2. *Everything* that happens on the way to a goal is there to assist me and my colleagues in raising productivity toward that goal.
3. When emotional subtext is present, nothing meaningful will happen until it’s addressed and resolved.
4. There is an essential, authentic essence within each individual which is beyond what we do or say or think or feel, and when I focus my attention on that aspect of another person, conflict becomes irrelevant.
5. There is a creative consciousness available to us in any moment which can be accessed to solve challenges and create solutions. ■

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