

Escaping Flatland Hell...to a Connect and Collaborate World

By Tom Lombardi and Richard Hawkes

Many of us have done sentences under micromanagers, overbearing bosses, and leaders willing to get results at any cost. It's Glengarry Glen Ross meets The Devil's Advocate.

Perhaps you're one of those people, and in your search for something better have found a culture where freedom, empowerment, and corporate democracy reign. Here, it appears, everyone has a voice...and a vote. There is deep respect for the individual, and leaders espouse such values as compassion and inclusion.

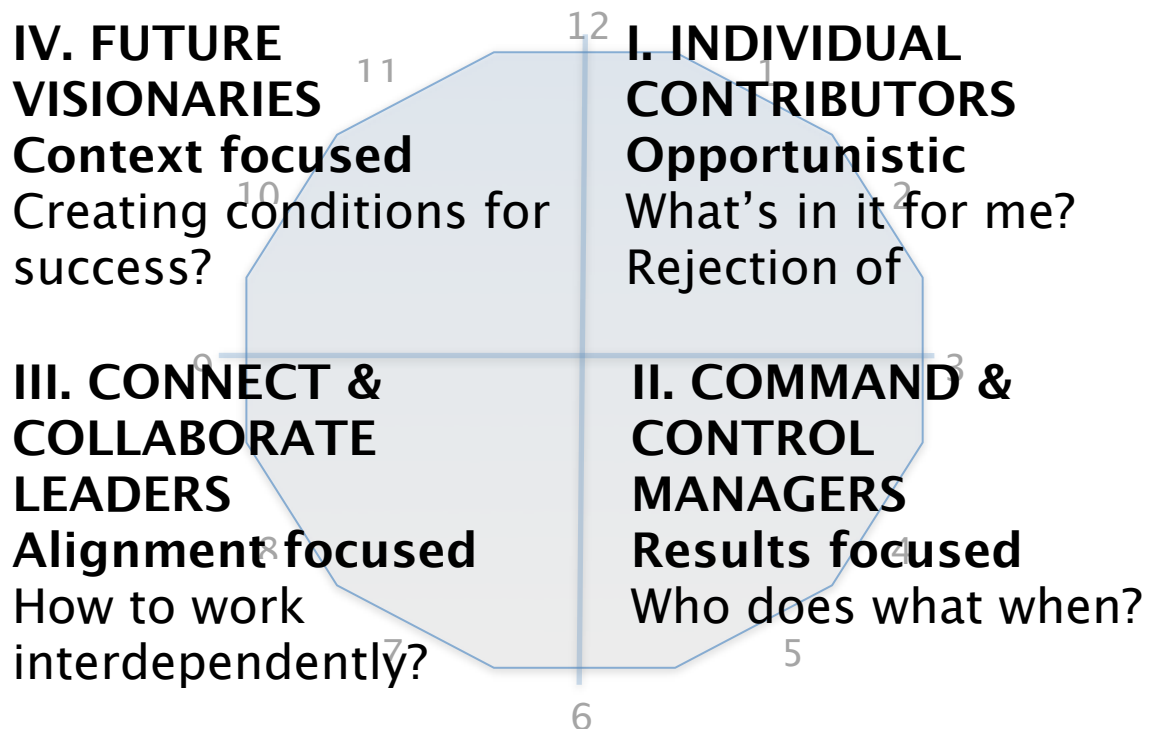
Perhaps you've found what you are looking for. Or ...

You may have fallen into Flatland Hell!

How can you tell the difference? Well, you're stuck in Flatland Hell when:

1. Despite good intentions, decision-making slows to a debilitating pace, giving new meaning to the word deliberate.
2. The expectation of consensus combined with hidden conflict, creates regular breakdowns in workflow and communication.
3. Pink elephants and sacred cows roam freely throughout the organization, with no weapons on hand to take them out.
4. No matter how Joe fails to embrace team behaviors, he ain't goin' anywhere considering his 30 years of "dedicated service."
5. Meetings feel like water torture, a regular reminder of the non-engagement of capable leaders and their inability to hold people accountable.

If this describes your organization or leadership team, you might be tempted to return to the bad old days of expedient dysfunction and management by tyrant. No need. Please, stop and consider the model on the next page, which shows the limitations and attributes of organizations in different stages of development.



Take a moment to consider, where on this clock would you place the old organization you fled? Probably somewhere between 4 and 5? And where is your current organization? Probably somewhere between 2 and 4? In some ways you might feel like you're better off, but from a business scalability perspective it looks like you've gone backwards.

Here is how this works:

- At each stage, scalability and performance potential increase.
- Each stage builds on the capabilities/skills of earlier stages, as well as overcomes the limitations of earlier stages.
- High-performance teams/organizations operate at stage III or higher (6 o'clock or higher).
- A single organization can include leaders and teams at different stages.
- Organizations will evolve or devolve to the stage of the top leader/top team.
- Limitations, not capabilities, determine stage of development.
- From the perspective of higher stage leaders, lower stage ways of operating are not "wrong" but simply "more limited."

So how do you help your organization leapfrog from stage 1 to stage 3?

Evolution to Stage 3 and beyond involves a series of choices leaders make to embrace several inconvenient truths.

1. Leaders need to continually choose results of the team and organization above their own comfort and personal needs.
2. Leaders need to change their mindset from working in the business to working on the business
3. Leaders need to become architects of a system of roles where team members operate interdependently.
4. Leaders must embody a value system which places clarity above harmony, leading to effective protocols and agreements where conflict becomes a source of innovation.

The following are brief examples of two Growth River Clients who have made the jump to Stage 3 based on these imperatives.

Client 1: A large, prominent nonprofit stuck in a stage 1 downward spiral.

Many employees were in clear reaction to the command and control style of the organization's founder and former CEO. In an attempt to remain flat and for leadership to appear non-hierarchical, roles became confused and accountabilities unclear. Meetings (too long and too numerous) became a forum for turf wars and leader rants. Morale suffered.

The first thing top leadership did was to accept challenging feedback, bringing several untouchable issues to the table for discussion. They identified behaviors and structures that protected them and their divisions from accountability. They also took full responsibility for the bottlenecks that had been created and agreed to practice a consultative, versus consensus, form of decision-making.

Within one year, a clear system of roles was defined and implemented. A new enterprise structure and set of operating protocols created a framework for teams to operate interdependently. Employees began to look forward to meetings, a place where full engagement was expected and accountability welcomed. Conflict and diversity became primary sources of innovation.

Client 2: A for-profit, service organization led by a highly successful and controlling CEO (we'll call him Allen).

Allen recognized a pattern among his leaders that created a barrier to organizational growth. Key leaders would not play their role for fear of being taken over midstream in a project or with a client.

After receiving written and verbal feedback from various parts of the organization, Allen publicly committed to changing the way he engaged colleagues and clients. From now on, he would respond only to specific requests made for his direct involvement.

Over many months, Allen extricated himself from the details of the business and got busy creating opportunities so his direct reports could operate interdependently and fully execute their role. He also invested time and resources to align senior leadership around a growth strategy.

Allen won over many members of his organization, who appreciated the operational changes and were inspired by the new levels of self-awareness and authenticity.

Escape from both Flatland and Tyrant Land involves the jump to Evolutionary Stage 3. In a Connect and Collaborate world, teams align around such items as strategy, infrastructure, process, and protocols.

The result is a workplace where every individual can find the possibility for extraordinary contribution, without the need for a constantly updated resume.