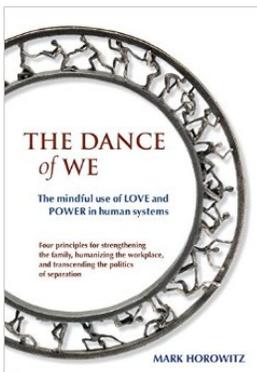




Dance of We: The Mindful Use of Love and Power in Human Systems

A Review of Mark Horowitz's Dance of We

By Kristina Wile



For most of us, simply knowing what is going awry in a system is only the first step of the journey. As systemic thinkers, we look to identify the true causes of problematic behavior in our systems and to make the changes necessary to improve these systems. Mark Horowitz, in his book *The Dance of We: The*

Mindful Use of Love and Power in Human Systems, tackles a crucial aspect of the implementation challenge: helping people make the shift to healthy and functional human systems.

Horowitz provides practical approaches to this difficult terrain, drawing on ideas put forth by many others in the field of Organizational Learning including, Senge, Kahane, and others. Additionally, Horowitz's long experience as a systemic family and corporate therapist and coach is put to work as he identifies key ideas and practices to address underlying systemic characteristics. The book also provides individual and group exercises to help internalize these ideas. From his unique perspective,

Horowitz provides an introduction and a compelling argument for the need to see things from a systems perspective.

The Ideal of Life-Affirming Systems

Throughout the book, Horowitz articulates his ideal that life-affirming systems are ones that encourage creativity, reward responsibility and initiative, and acknowledge the unique contribution each person is capable of making. He suggests that, at a minimum, systems need to be benign and not destroy our humanity.

Horowitz provides examples of the ways in which this ideal is not met—the ways that systems can and do exercise oppressive power over people, in addition to perpetuating collective rules and assumptions. He provides examples of these legacy power-over (as opposed to power-with) systems through the majorisms of our day: imperialism, sexism, racism, etc, which continue to be challenges for society.

Horowitz suggests that these power-over systems boil down to the result of two things:

1. Objectifying groups of people by seeing them as less than fully human.
2. Blaming them for the problems in the system.

Objectification, he notes, can happen to others, but we can also objectify ourselves in self-objectification. When we give away our power, we sell our own dream, goals, and humanity short.

Blaming occurs when we neglect to understand the interconnectedness of systems. Both objectification and blaming undermine Horowitz's ideal of life-affirming nature of systems.

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Dysfunction – Signs and Pervasiveness

Horowitz identifies a number of signs of dysfunction in systems including, secrecy, control of members, sense of righteousness, conflict, and blame. From his own experience in dysfunctional systems, he marvels at how blinded members of a system can be to the dysfunction. People in dysfunctional, and even destructive, systems often become utterly convinced that their actions are done for good, and any signs that something is amiss are interpreted as something to be discounted, isolated, or attacked.

Horowitz provides numerous examples in familiar systems: governments (for one, the gridlock in the United States Legislature), businesses (companies involved in the mortgage derivatives business leading up to 2008 collapse of the financial system), and non-profit organizations (the Catholic Church's handling of the child abuse scandal) that are compelling in their array and familiarity.

These signs of dysfunction are similar throughout various organizations. In particular, Horowitz notes the systemic forces and

the resulting pressures on the people at the top, in the middle, and at the bottom of hierarchical organizations. The Tops feel responsible and often take on more and more work. The Middles feel pulled in two different directions, and feel forced to tow the line from above. And, the Bottoms feel demotivated and simply wait to be told what to do.

These pressures are caused by collective assumptions and expectations, which often remain unspoken. When people are asked to change roles, the unspoken rules and expectations of the new level are assumed and played out by them in exactly the same way, even if they perceived them as negative. This assumption of dysfunction is an indicator that the system, not the individuals, is the cause.

In many cases, people internalize these forces and feel powerless to change their role in the system. It feels as though they have no choice. This results with the individuals in the system effectively giving their power away, which limits individual creativity and effectiveness and creates a perceived distance between the players in the system. It objectifies those who are perceived to be calling the shots, or those not competent enough to do the work. Objectification is a key problem when trying to fix systems filled with human beings, as discussed in the section above.

The Keys to Reclaiming Health in Human Systems

Horowitz's suggestions to overcome dysfunction in human systems address these concerns. He provides many nuanced examples and approaches, but the main ideas are disidentifying, seeing, and balancing love and power.

Disidentifying – A means to regaining Power

Overcoming blindness is the first step in the process of identifying dysfunction. Horowitz suggests this requires disidentifying with the system. This can be described as obtaining psychological distance from the system, or looking at the bigger picture. The psychological distancing is, in essence, the act of



becoming aware of our own thinking, assumptions, or mental models. Disidentifying is needed at both the individual and group levels to regain Power.

At the individual level it is important to step back and look at ourselves in the various systems we are in. We need to re-establish our self and agency, which is to re-establish our personal power.

Horowitz suggests mindfully regaining this Power in ways that don't reduce or infringe on others' Power. If we are going to change an entire system, others need to go through the process of re-establishing their individual purpose and Power as well, so it is important to consider this development in their agency from the beginning.

One focus of this effort should be individual values and purpose: Who am I? Who are we? What do I want to achieve? What do we want to achieve? This focus also helps bring to light the differences between the way we want to live and work, and the way we actually live and work—the gaps between espoused values and those in practice.

Horowitz points out that this effort takes courage, even at the individual level, because we often fall into patterns of self oppression. Examples from Horowitz's personal experience strengthen and illuminate the suggestions and patterns needed, and his openness about his central involvement in a very dysfunctional business system is a refreshing example. Courage for this change is required at the group level as well, because navigating the interconnected multiplicity of empowered individuals is always a challenge.

Seeing – A means to Loving

Another crucial element to navigate many individuals' agency at the group level, is Love. This requires stopping and seeing people as individuals with as much desire and merit as oneself—to perceive and understand the value they bring to the group. To really see someone's life and their humanity is to Love them. To Love

them is to recognize our connectedness, that they are part of the whole, as we are part of the whole. And, to respect them, is to see them, again.

Horowitz recommends these guiding principles to this seeing practice:

- Intention
- Mutual value and respect
- Curiosity
- Discernment in the face of challenge

It is this seeing and Love, in conjunction with individual agency, that can enable Horowitz's goal, a Power-with system, or system full of individual agents working for a greater purpose.

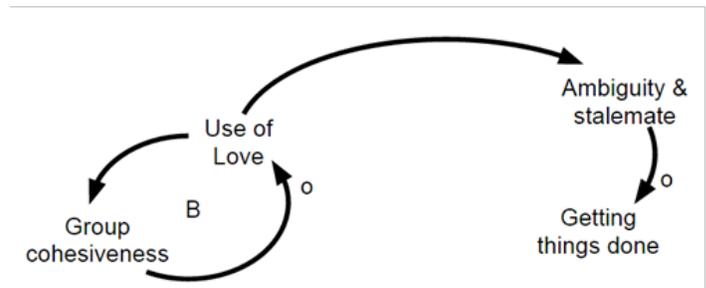


Figure 1. Love drives group cohesiveness, but can erode ability to get things done. Source: Leverage Networks

Balancing Love and Power

When discussing the balance between Love and Power, Horowitz builds on Adam Kahane's work on the use of Power and Love for social change. He notes that people tend to be more comfortable in one or the other of the two modes: Power or Love. Each sphere has positive attributes, as well as limitations.

People who are more comfortable in the arena of Love (Fig. 1) like to bring people together, to hear all viewpoints, and to be peacemakers. The downside of overreliance on Love can be confusion, ambiguity, overwhelmedness, and stalemate.

People who are more comfortable in the realm of Power (Fig. 2) are able to articulate what they want and persist in getting what they need—often



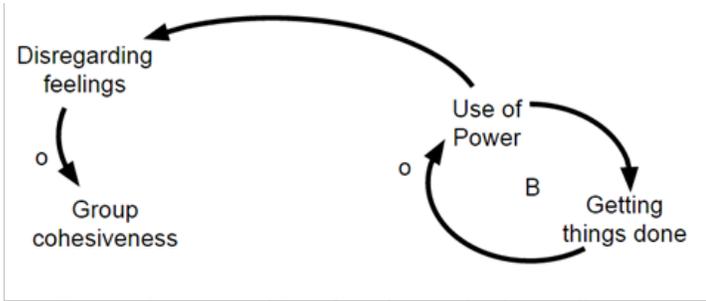


Figure 2. Power gets things done, but can lead to eroding group cohesiveness. Source: Leverage Networks

through clear arguments and set boundaries. They are good at getting things done. But, they do this at the expense of group cohesiveness, because they are seen as people who disregard feelings through stubbornness, unwillingness to listen, and an inability to compromise and live with consensus.

Overreliance on either sphere prevents a system from becoming the most effective it could be. Love balances the limitations of Power, and Power balances the limitations of Love. And, if used in equal measure (Fig. 3), together they can create a powerful reinforcing dynamic to yield a high performance organization that achieves much by tapping into the group’s alignment.

The Role of Mindfulness

Horowitz emphasizes that this work takes practice and he encourages us to explore techniques to develop mindfulness. Mindfulness can help

to maintain the awareness of our own internal reactions and our behavior, as well as the reactions and behaviors of others. This awareness is necessary to maintain the psychological distance from our systems that enables us both to disidentify from the system and to see others more clearly. These actions can, and should, take place at both the individual level, as well as at the organizational level. Horowitz provides a long list of resources in his appendices for people ready to awaken the human potential within both themselves and the systems in which they live.

The Dance of We is a strong systemic read that reiterates and deepens the understanding of the human and psychological work necessary to collectively change our mindsets, the highest leverage points in achieving true deep individual and organizational change.

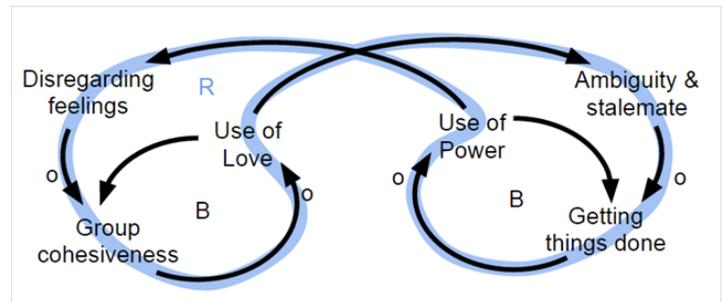


Figure 3. Love and Power, when used together, can reinforce one another to maximize potential. Source: Leverage Networks

Source

Horowitz, Mark. *Dance of We: The Mindful Use of Love and Power in Human Systems*. The Synthesis Center, 2014.

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