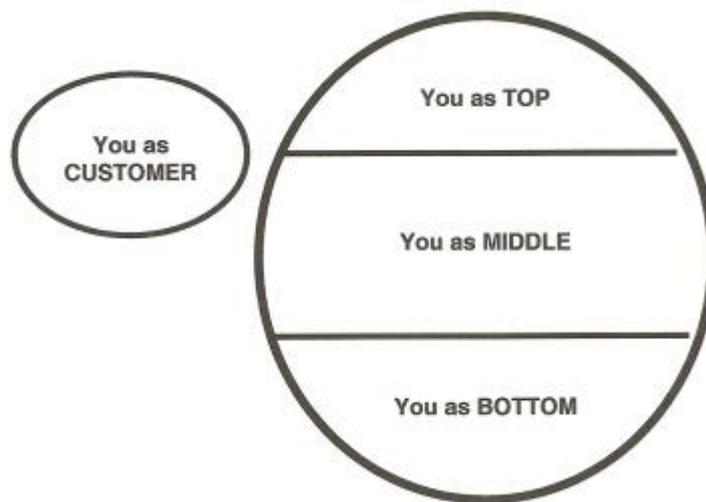# TOTAL SYSTEM POWER
## Developers, Fixers, Integrators, and Validators

*What each of us can do in our multiple roles as Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers to create a system with outstanding capacity to survive and develop.*

*By Barry Oshry*

## We are all Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers



Top, Middle, Bottom, and Customer are *conditions* all of us face in whatever position we occupy.

In certain interactions, we are Top when we have designated responsibility (accountability) for some piece of the action whether it's the whole organization, a division within it, a department, a project team, or a classroom.

In other interactions, we are Bottom when we are experiencing problems with our condition and/or with the condition of the system, problems that we think higher ups ought to be taking care of but are not. We can be Bottom at any level of the organization.

In other interactions, we are Middle, when we are experiencing conflicting demands, priorities, and pressures coming at us from two or more individuals or groups.

And in still other interactions, we are Customer, when we are looking to some other person or group for a product or service we need in order to move our work ahead.

Even in the most complex, multilevel, multifunctional organizations, each of us is constantly moving in and out of Top/Middle/Bottom/Customer conditions. In each of these conditions there are unique opportunities for contributing to total system power; and in each there are pitfalls that readily lead us to forfeit those contributions.

In this paper we will examine:

1. the unique contributions we can make to total system power when we are in Top, Middle, Bottom, and Customer conditions,

2. the pitfalls in each condition that can cause us to forfeit those contributions, and

3. how we can avoid those pitfalls while working together to create systems with outstanding capacities to survive and develop.

# Total System Power
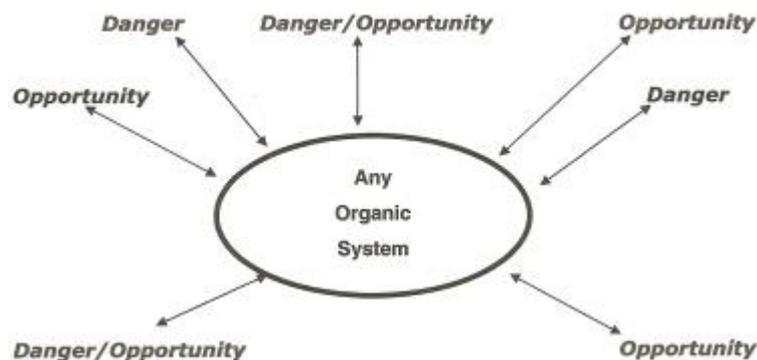


1. **The fundamental business of all human systems is survival and development.** Systems exist in and interact with their environments. Their fundamental business is to **survive** -- to continue their existence -- and to **develop** -- to realize their full potential, to become all that they can be. This is true of any living system whether that system is the corner grocery, the mega corporation, the military, a sports team, a religious denomination, or you. The challenge is: survive and develop.

2. **Systems survive and develop by coping with dangers and prospecting among opportunities.** Systems exist in environments of **danger** -- conditions that can threaten their survival or limit their development possibilities -- and **opportunity** -- conditions that

potentially support survival and development. Systems survive and develop by creating mechanisms and processes for coping with the dangers and prospecting among the opportunities. Powerful systems are systems with outstanding capacities for coping and prospecting.

3. **Systems are systems within systems within systems.** An organization is a complex of systems within systems within systems. The organization as a whole exists in its environment and its business is to cope with the dangers and prospect among the opportunities of that environment. Within the organization are other entities (sub-systems), each of which exists in its environment of dangers and opportunities, and the business of each is to survive and develop by coping and prospecting with these dangers and opportunities. (See, for example, *Act III: Seeing Patterns of Process* in <u>Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life</u>, for a description of the unique environments occupied by Top, Middle, and Bottom groups.)

4. **In our multi-faceted roles, both our system power opportunities and the pitfalls we face vary depending on which constellation we are experiencing. And we may be experiencing several of these simultaneously.** For example,

- in one constellation, we are Bottom, on the receiving end of deep budget cuts coming from above;

- at the same time, we are Middle torn between requests for resources from our workers and pressures to do more with less from our immediate manager;

- simultaneously, we are still Top who is being held accountable for the morale and output of our work group;

- in the meantime, we may also be Customer, who is awaiting long delayed delivery on the new computer system we promised our group.

So, in the moment we are experiencing four different conditions: Top, Middle, Bottom, and Customer. And each of these conditions carries its own agenda; each is positioned to make its unique contribution to Total System Power.

- As Top, the potential is to function as **Developer**,

- as Bottom, it is to function as **Fixer**,

- as Middle, as **Integrator**,

- and as Customers as **Validator**.

# Our System Power Potential and How We Sabotage It

## Tops as System Developers

When we're Top, our unique system power potential is to be System **Developers**, that is, to strengthen the capacity of that system for which we are accountable such that it is better able to cope and prospect in its environment. Our work as Top is to create a system in which all members are knowledgeable about the system's condition – the dangers and opportunities in its environment, all feel responsible for the system's survival and development, and all are developing and using their full potential in doing the work of the system toward that end. As Tops, some of the ways we develop such systems are:

1. We inform system members; we share the big picture–the dangers and opportunities in the system's environment;

2. We involve system members in dealing with both the dangers and opportunities the system is facing; the more critical the issue, the more we need to involve them;

3. We ask system members for help, draw them in on issues, problems, dilemmas we are experiencing, and solicit their input on the dangers and opportunities they see;

4. We give system members big "games" to play, important challenges that both contribute to the system's capacity and are arenas for members to develop.

5. We coach system members, helping them identify and overcome their weaknesses and develop their strengths such that they are better able to help the system cope and prospect.

**How we sabotage ourselves as Tops.** When problems hit, not always, not every time, but with great regularity, we suck responsibility up to ourselves and away from others. The more critical the issue, the more likely we are to suck it up. It's not like a choice we make; more like a reflex. It's simply crystal clear that we are responsible for resolving the problem.

By sucking responsibility up to ourselves and away from others, as Tops we diminish our potential as system developers:

1. We limit the brainpower and other resources that can be brought to bear on issues the system is facing;

2. We become so involved in everything that major dangers and opportunities go unaddressed;

3. We diminish system-wide responsibility by reinforcing the belief that we are responsible and others are not;

4. We deprive others of the big challenges that could become important arenas of personal growth and development. The more we suck up to ourselves, the more we disable others, diminishing their potential contributions.

The reflex response to suck up responsibility may be supported by other factors:

1. Our belief that this is what leadership is: bearing the burden, sparing the others;

2. The culture in which we exist supports the above belief;

3. Our fear of looking weak;

4. Our concern that creating responsibility in others could lead to unexpected problems for which we would still be held responsible.

Whatever factors reinforce this pattern, the results are the same. The capacity of the system for which we are accountable remains underdeveloped with the cost being decreased coping and prospecting.

## Bottoms as System Fixers

When we're Bottom, our unique system power potential is to be system **Fixers**. We are the ones who are experiencing things that are wrong with our condition and things that are wrong with the system, all of which, so long as they remain untended, are diminishing the capacity of the system to cope and prospect. As Bottom, we are uniquely situated for identifying these problem issues and mobilizing the resources – our own and others' - necessary for correcting them. To Fixers, problems become projects to be worked on. Some of the ways we function as Fixers are:

1. We let higher-ups know about the problems we see and our willingness to work at correcting these;

2. We clarify for them the costs these problems have for ourselves, others, and the system;

3. We use our closeness to the situation to elaborate a vision of what actions could be taken and the consequences these actions could have for the system.

4. We see ourselves as central players in helping the system cope and prospect – to avoid the dangers it is facing and take advantage of its opportunities.

**How we sabotage ourselves as Bottoms.** Not always, not every time, but with great regularity, when there are problems with our condition and the condition of the system, we reflexively hold higher-ups responsible for them. End of story. Again, it's often not a choice, more like a reflex. It's crystal clear to us that *they* are responsible, not us.

In doing so, we diminish our capacity as system Fixers in several ways:

1. Our capacity for solving system problems is underdeveloped and underused;

2. We leave the solution of these problems to people who are more remote from and likely to be less invested in their solution;

3. We increase the likelihood that problems will continue.

The reflex response to hold others responsible for these problems may be supported by other factors such as:

1. The culture of the system is to regularly look upward for the solution to problems; no matter how high up you go, there's always some "them" to blame;

2. To do otherwise could put me at odds with my peers who are steadfast in holding others responsible;

3. If we assume responsibility for fixing problems, we run the risk of failure; blaming others keeps us safe;

4. Higher-ups discourage us from getting involved in *their* business.

To the extent to which this pattern persists, the system is denied our resources to help it ward off threats and take advantage of opportunities.

## Middles as System Integrators

When we're Middles our unique system power potential is to be system **Integrators**. We are, potentially, the system's web, akin to the circulatory and nervous systems of the human organism: connecting all the parts, coordinating their interaction, ensuring the flow of essential information and nutrients throughout the system.

Middles integrate the system by moving back and forth between **dispersing** and **integrating**. When we disperse, we move out to lead, manage, supervise, advise, coach other individuals and groups. When we integrate, we join together with our peers to:

1. Share information (intelligence) about our parts of the system;

2. Use the collective information to diagnose system issues–new dangers that are looming, new opportunities that are emerging;

3. Strengthen the coping and prospecting capacities of system parts by sharing information and best practices gathered through integration;

4. Coordinate system functioning, reduce unwanted duplication of effort, and move resources and knowledge to where they are needed in the system.

Integration improves the quality of our dispersing: we are stronger, supported, informed about system wide conditions, better able to provide others with the information and resources they need to do their work.

**How we sabotage ourselves as Integrators.** As Middles, we sabotage ourselves by reflexively connecting with certain parts of the system while reducing our connectivity to other parts. For example, our primary connection (allegiance) may be to those above us with the loss of connectivity with those below; or the reverse could also be the case. *The connection we are most vulnerable to losing is that with one another.* (See In the Middle.)

When the **disperse/integrate** web shreds or fails to develop, we diminish our capacity as system integrators in several ways:

1. Individually, we Middles are weaker, unsupported, and less knowledgeable about wider system issues;

2. Because of our limited knowledge we provide lower quality service to those we lead, manage, coach, supervise;

3. System parts lose their connectedness resulting in inconsistency in information and treatment, destructive competition, and redundant resources.

4. The system as a whole is likely to be less coordinated;

5. And because of issues we either fail to handle or create, more items fall into the lap of our Top.

In addition to our losing our connectedness reflexively, there are other factors that contribute to our dis-integration:

1. The culture of the organization - neither in its role definitions nor its reward systems - supports middle integration; we are hired, promoted, and rewarded for dispersing but not for integrating.

2. In the dis-integrated state, we fall into our "I" mentality in which we experience ourselves as separate from our peers. In the "I" mentality we each tend to feel:

   o …unique
   o …we have little in common with others
   o …competitive with others
   o …evaluative of others often on surface issues
   o …there is no collective power among us.

   So we fall into this vicious cycle in which being dis-integrated leads to the "I" mentality, and the "I" mentality reinforces our remaining disintegrated.  (This pattern is described in more detail in Seeing Systems, 2nd edition, pp. 156-158.)

The consequences of this dis-integrated pattern include: weakening individuals Middles, reducing the quality of their contributions to others, adding to the complexity and burden of their Tops, producing inconsistencies and lack of coordination among systems parts, all of which diminishes the coping and prospecting capacity of the system.

## Customers as System Validators

When we're Customers – whether of internal organizational providers or external providers - our unique system power potential is to be system **Validators**. We are the ones who are experiencing the delivery of the products or services we need in order to move our work ahead. We are the ones who are in the best position to evaluate the quality of that delivery process: Are we getting what we wanted, are we getting it when we wanted it, at the price we expected, and at the quality we needed? As Validators, we are in the best position to strengthen the coping and prospecting capacity of the system by strengthening the quality of delivery processes. Some of the ways we function as Validators are:

1. We indicate to providers our willingness to work in partnership with them with the goal of generating the highest quality products and services;

2. We hold delivery systems – internal and external - to high standards; if quality lags, we do not settle;

3. We provide detailed feedback regarding delivery, what works and what doesn't;

4. We make suggestions for improvement;

5. We see that our feedback gets to the right people, those who are responsible for delivery and are in a position to influence it;

6. We stay close, developing a positive partnership relationship with those who directly provide delivery;

7. We don't wait until final delivery and then judge it; as part of our initial contract, we maintain contact with the delivery process on an ongoing basis.

**How we sabotage ourselves as Validators.** When we are in the Customer condition, we reflexively hold the delivery system responsible for delivery; *it* is responsible, we are not. If delivery is substandard, it's crystal clear to us that the delivery system is at fault, not us. After all, we are the Customer; we are entitled. So we put full responsibility for service improvement on the Provider. By limiting our responsibility for and involvement in the delivery process:

1. The system's capacity for delivering and receiving high quality products and services is diminished.

2. we reduce the likelihood of getting what we want;

3. we run the risk of worsening the relationship between provider and customer as unsatisfactory delivery piles up on unsatisfactory delivery;

4. we fail to engage in the provider/customer dialogues that can yield high quality products and services;

5. we may waste considerable time and energy searching for the perfect provider when we have the opportunity to create such a relationship with the providers we already have.

The reflex response to hold delivery systems responsible for delivery may be supported by other factors, chiefly the accepted wisdom both in one's organization and in the larger culture that the Customer is always right. The notion that as Validators we should be partners in delivery often runs counter-cultural and supports us in feeling that as Customers we are *entitled*.

To the extent to which this pattern persists, we diminish the quality of both internal and external customer service, thereby weakening the coping and prospecting capacity of the system.

# A Framework for Total System Empowerment

Each of us, regardless of our **position** in the organization, needs to:

1. see ourself as constantly shifting in and out of Top, Bottom, Middle, and Customer *conditions*,

2. know that in each condition we have the system power potential for strengthening the system's ability to survive and develop, to cope with the dangers in its environment and to prospect among its opportunities,

3. recognize that when we're in the Top condition, our system power potential is to function as **Developers**, in the Bottom condition as **Fixers**, in the Middle condition as **Integrators**, and in the Customer condition as **Validators**,

4. and, in order to achieve the system power of these conditions, avoid the reflex responses: sucking up responsibility when we're Top, holding higher-ups responsible when we're Bottom, losing our connectivity when we're Middle; and holding delivery systems responsible for delivery when we're Customers.

These forms of system power enhance one another and together create Total System Power.

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**For more reading:**

- *Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life* (2nd edition), Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, 2007.

- *In the Middle*, Power + Systems, Inc., Boston, 1994.

**For the experience:**

- The Organization Workshop on Creating Partnership.
www.powerandsystems.com