

chapter ONE

Plugging In to the Twenty-First Century

Imagine this: You are an executive at an online retailing company. A mid-level customer service representative at your company has begun tracking and responding to customer comments on Facebook and Twitter without clearing his actions with management. The response from customers has been great, and you've even gotten some popular press coverage. But this isn't a sanctioned activity. What will you do?

1. Contact the service rep and ask him to stop until you've had a chance to clear this approach with company security and marketing.
2. Contact the service rep and congratulate him on the great idea. Let other executives know about the service representative's success.

3. Add a computer monitoring tool to keep track of the customer and service rep activities on these public sites. Get involved only if you see a problem building.
4. Write a new company policy about employee actions on social media sites.
5. Organize and train a team of customer service reps to help the first service rep as public interest grows. Have this team suggest guidelines and tools for other areas of the organization to use.
6. Automatically block access to social networking sites from company computers.

In our ongoing research, my colleagues and I are finding that people's answers are very different depending on how "plugged in" they are. I call "plugged-in" managers those who are able to see choices across each of an organization's dimensions of people, technology, and organizational processes and then to mix them together into new and powerful organizational strategies, structures, and practices.

What set the plugged-in managers apart in their responses to this scenario was their apparent comfort with letting the use of the technology and the organizational policies and procedures emerge.¹ Plugged-in managers were more likely to write a new company policy about employee actions on social media sites and to organize and train a separate team of customer service reps to help the first service rep as public interest grows than the less plugged-in respondents were, and the plugged-in managers were far less likely to add a computer monitoring tool or block access to social media sites. The plugged-in managers were focused on working with their people to develop tools and rules that could evolve with the situation. Less plugged-in respondents seemed to want to control the situation.

None of the respondents had a clear-cut framework to help them make their decisions. With this book I hope to change that.

Why Plug In Now?

Social networking is not the only organizational challenge confronting organizations today. We live and work in a world that is constantly changing in terms of the ways we communicate, collaborate, make decisions, find jobs, and entertain ourselves. Our computers shift with increasing speed through software revisions and the introduction of smaller, yet often more powerful, hardware. Every day we see some expansion in the vast variety of how and where we can connect to the Internet and what we find when we get there. Tools that used to be just tools are now “smart” and may do their own connecting to the Internet or store their information for later use. (I’m thinking about how my cell phone is linked to my running shoes via a pedometer app, which in turn links to a social networking website to help me keep track of my activity levels.)

Your organization most likely needs to operate globally, work jointly with other organizations to take on big tasks, and share research and results with employees, customers, clients, and partners as never before. The people inside your organization are probably more diverse in terms of age, technological sophistication, and cultural background than just a few years ago. You and your colleagues can generally expect to have multiple careers.

To be effective in this changing world, you need to understand how to work and manage in a way that brings together all of the related organizational processes, technology tools, and people populating our workplaces. Although I’d like to simplify and call these three elements the building blocks of organizations, I can’t. None of the three can stand alone. The processes, technology, and people (with their knowledge, skills, and abilities) must all be considered and dealt with together, not as independent or isolated factors, for our work and organizations to be effective.

In other words, you need to plug in to effectively work and manage in the twenty-first century.

Plugging in means having the ability to mix together these three elements:

- The knowledge, skills, and abilities of the people you are working with
- The technology tools of work (everything from email to the size and type of tools a crew would use to build a fence)
- The way you organize your work (for example, teams spread all over the world, the size of the fence-building crew, formal and informal leadership, hiring and pay plans)

You typically can't just make a change to one of those three dimensions without making an adjustment to the others as well.

Think about it this way: Let's say your organization wants you to team up with a group in another country and time zone. You may need to change your work hours. You must be sure the team has access to a good teleconferencing technology and gets some basic training on how to use that technology. You can't just declare that everyone should start working together and neglect "mixing" in some other changes to support it. You have to be thinking about all your technology tools, organizational processes, and people as you determine how to get work done with the other group.

Keep in mind, too, that there's probably no single best way to get the work done. Some teams use the latest and greatest technologies (and make sure they have the latest and greatest skills to use them), while other teams decide to stick to phone calls and faxing notes around. You just need to be sure that the approach works well as a whole system.

Getting plugged in does not require that you have x-ray vision into human capabilities, or be an expert with the raw materials

of technology tools, or know the intricacies of organizational operations. You can work with other people who do have deep expertise in the specific area. You just need to be aware of your options and realize that designing work as a system, rather than just changing one thing at a time, is essential to organizational success.²

Plugged-in management is important no matter what your organizational setting, whether you are in a high-tech software company, heavy manufacturing, or a health non-profit. Even a crew building a fence will be better off if they balance the technologies they have access to with the size and skills of the team members. A bigger gas-powered posthole digger may mean the work goes faster, but you need two heavy people to run it, and those people may need to take more breaks. A good team leader, or a strong self-managing team, will have taken a look at the project and brought the right tools and people for the job. They also will have made thoughtful choices about how to manage quality, speed, and safety. Different projects may use different pay plans; for example, pay by the quality of the project, pay by experience or skill, and or a bonus for finishing early with no injuries.

Again, there is no one best way, but all the parts have to be taken into account and mixed together purposefully.

In other words, organizational success more likely occurs when all three critical dimensions—technology, organization, and human capabilities and motivations—are taken into account concurrently. There are no silver bullets. Even excellent management actions, if restricted to a single dimension, can never have the same success as when all three dimensions are managed together. Fredrick Brooks, summarizing the issues in a classic 1986 article, notes “There is no single development, in either technology or in management technique, that by itself promises even one order of magnitude improvement in productivity, in reliability, in simplicity.”³

Plugged-In Management for All

Everyone in your organization needs to get more plugged in. Individual contributors use their plugged-in expertise to decide the best way to do their work. Members of work teams use plugged-in skills to help the team find the best combinations of people, tools, and organizational processes for a particular task. Managers use plugged-in approaches to build organizations that are effective and efficient. Organizational leaders use plugged-in abilities to create a vision for the future.

Plugged-in management applies to all organizational tasks and settings: from recruiting to sales presentations, from managing virtual teams to building streamlined innovation systems, from decisions about the latest management fad to coal mining—an industry for which some of these ideas were first considered in the 1950s.⁴ People, technology, and policies and procedures are foundational to our organizational actions. Success in management—and in business in general—demands the simultaneous, interwoven consideration of these foundational components:

- **People:** How many there are, the skills they have, the basics of human reactions (people go toward rewards and away from punishment), their demographic backgrounds, the languages they speak, and so on.

- **Technology:** Software applications, network infrastructures, and even hard technologies like assembly lines and toilets (for example, in hospital rooms); the quality, access, integration, and support of these technology systems.

- **Organizational Policies, Procedures, and Processes:** Approaches to recruiting, hiring (both contract and permanent), training, evaluation, pay, and other performance management activities; team or individual contributor-focused structures; layers of management; focus on outsourcing; and the like. For simplicity, I'll label this component Organizational Process.

Our work is not done in silos, yet much of our technology and work infrastructures are built as if it were. Management isn't just about organizational process. Management isn't just about technology. Management certainly isn't just about people. Too often, discussions of management look at people, technology, *or* organization. Rarely do we see the three addressed in an integrated, whole-system way. When we do, the result is game-changing.

What's Ahead

Plugged-in management skill is one of the most important capabilities a modern manager can have. Having a clear strategic vision, “emotional intelligence,” and other soft skills is key, but the big impact comes from knowing how to work with people, technology, and organizational process all at the same time to reach that strategic vision. In this book, you will discover the reality of the modern business landscape and learn how to mix people, technology, and organization into strong, flexible business solutions.

This chapter and the next introduce the concept of plugged-in management and set us on our journey. This first chapter outlines the critical need for plugged-in management and summarizes its broad benefits to managers and organizations today. It provides a road map for the rest of the book. Chapter Two defines the landscape in terms of the many different ways that modern organizations are becoming increasingly complex in terms of the people, technology, and organizational process within them.

Part One: The Three Practices of Plugged-In Managers

The heart of the book is organized around three practices that plugged-in managers consistently demonstrate:

1. Plugged-in managers assess the situation and scan the environment for resources and pitfalls. They “Stop-Look-Listen” in the same way we all do before crossing a busy street or starting to cook a meal for family or friends. They *stop* to reflect on the situation:

- Is this an incremental change in your organization or a major strategic move?
- Is this a weeknight quick dinner or a holiday repast?
- Do you have to go to the store, or are you ready to begin chopping?

They *look* at available data (or collect some via simple experiments) to narrow down the possibilities:

- What do you already know that will help you with this project?
- What recipes have you tried and how did they work?

They *listen* to feedback from others involved at the core and in connecting roles:

- What did participants in your last event say on the social networks?
- Are you seeing reductions in downtime after restructuring your call center?
- Did your guests want seconds and then ask you to share your recipes?

2. Plugged-in managers *mix* together solutions that balance the people, technology, and organizational process involved. They know that there are many ways to make a great meal, but all involve appropriately blending and balancing available ingredients and dishes.

3. Plugged-in managers *share* their savvy and skills with others. They publicly model good plugged-in management and give their colleagues the chance to build their own plugging-in skills through experience. Richer outcomes (and meals) happen when more people are involved. If you design work or a meal just for one, you are limited in what you can do. Plugged-in managers know that the more they share and integrate their choices with others, the stronger the outcome. The ideas and flavors will be more integrated, and the cooking process will become more aligned over time as everyone learns how their contributions best fit in the mix.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five focus on these three practices, respectively. They include deep examples from Providence Regional Medical Center, Southwest Airlines, and Nucor as context for understanding plugged-in management in action. (I owe a great debt to the many CEOs, managers, and individual contributors who have allowed me to include their stories as illustrations of these practices and their success.) I also lay out strategies for building on your plugged-in management skills. We all have some plugged-in management expertise, and even people with significant skills and experience can continue to learn to be more efficient and to fine-tune their approach.

Part Two: Learning to Plug In

Part Two is about developing your own skills for plugging in. Chapter Six is a chance for you to evaluate your own plugged-in management approach across a variety of examples. I've included two short assessment tools that will help you compare your own approach to those of some of the people mentioned in the book. The results may surprise you. You may even want to try the tools now, before digging into the background and examples in Parts One and Two. You may also want to ask your teammates at

some point to assess their own base levels of plugged-in management skills.

To round out your action plan for honing your skills, Chapter Seven offers opportunities to learn how to develop and apply plugged-in management in a series of complex situations. Chapter Eight then closes with an example of a layered approach to plugged-in management, in which the true power of plugging in comes together: You have plugged-in skills, your colleagues do as well, and your organization is built in a way that supports and develops plugged-in action.

The twenty-first century presents us with both challenges and opportunities. In the next chapter, I will point to specific reasons for getting more plugged in and illustrate some of the ways different organizations are thriving by putting plugged-in management to work.

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