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Book Talk: Dan Paul has *The Cure* for What Ails Business

Dan Paul is a management consultant and co-author of *The Cure*, a business novel about the transformation of an under-performing company and the techniques that worked to turn it around. Formerly with General Electric, Dan Paul is CEO of General Management Technologies, a consulting firm that helps clients align strategies, work processes and culture.

MCNews talked to Paul about what *The Cure* cures.

MCNews: This is an innovative format for a business book. Why did you approach the subject as a work of fiction?

Paul: Well, we all read a lot of business books that are interesting and some even have inspiring messages. But most of them are not terribly prescriptive: they don't tell you how to achieve the results they depict. Tom Peters' *In Search of Excellence* is a good example. He described what excellent companies are like, but he didn't show how your company can become one.

The Cure engages the reader in how to achieve what Jack Welch calls a "boundaryless" enterprise—one in which participants are not constrained by organizational boxes or myopia, but are encouraged to fully participate for the good of the enterprise. And the book does that in a way that draws people into the story and makes them identify with it.

I purposely approached my co-author, Jeff Cox, who is an accomplished fiction writer, and persuaded him that this was a good topic. The result is a realistic description of what the journey is like. More important, the book can serve as a model to improve any organization.

MCNews: What is the "illness" that *The Cure* treats?

Paul: The purpose of an organization should be to leverage the capabilities of the individuals in it, enabling them to combine their talents most effectively. All too often, organizations do the opposite—they frustrate those capabilities and stymie combinations. People get wrapped up in their silos rather than taking an enterprise-wide view. That leads to a lack of alignment between the strategy of an organization, its work processes and culture. The cure realigns those elements so individuals can maximize accomplishments within their organization.

MCNews: What are the symptoms that indicate an organization needs *The Cure*?

Paul: The most common symptom is some degree of paralysis. In these times of rapid external change, global competition and especially with the tough economy, a clear strategy and organizational agility are vital to the success of a business. But in a company that needs the cure,

management planning is more ritual than real. People go through the motions, but not much actually changes. Another symptom is that people down in the ranks don't understand how they can contribute to the business' success, even though they really would like to.

Bureaucracy, of course, is another word for this. It can be so pervasive that it destroys the vision for the company's future. In my experience, the senior team is often the biggest obstacle to overcoming this paralysis. Throughout their careers, senior people succeeded remarkably well within their silos, but they never had an opportunity to learn how to be enterprise leaders. So the silo mentality is what ripples through an organization that needs the cure.

MCNews: Let's talk about Enterprise Medicine, which is the foundation of *The Cure*. What are the ingredients of it and what makes it work?

Paul: It's about openness and honesty, and no sacred cows. It's about recognizing that it is the enterprise that matters, not the silos and the obstacles they create. Teamwork without that honesty is a sham. And real teamwork is what leads to the enterprise mindset. The cure exposes the issues in a factual way, which allows the organization to deal with its choices in a non-threatening and collaborative environment.

MCNews: Can you describe the process you go through to make the objectives of teamwork, open communication and honesty work?

Paul: We start with a diagnostic that's very simple—no rocket science. We interview broadly within the entire management group, and we also do a written survey to quantify the symptoms that surface in the interviews. Then, we bring everyone concerned together for a three-day workshop and share with them the story they have told us. The issues jump out at you. For the rest of the workshop, we figure out how to address those issues.

The key is that, over the next six months or so, we help cross-functional advocate teams work on aligning strategy, work processes and culture in each of the issue areas. We add a "core" team to the mix, which is made up of the best leaders from the advocate teams. The members of this group, together with the senior team, are the enterprise architects: they take what's discovered by the advocate teams, knit that together and create the essence of the new enterprise.

An important part of the process is to "hardwire" the changes recommended by the teams before the consultants leave. Otherwise, the changes won't last.

MCNews: What's involved in hardwiring?

Paul: It has to do with clarity and accountability. The work of the teams is documented in a data warehouse and as discoveries accumulate, they are displayed on the desktop of everybody in the company who's involved. Before long, you've got clear objectives, specific action initiatives, performance measures, and feedback and incentive systems in place. And, it's all there for everyone to see. Eventually, even the adversaries of the process figure out that you've got them surrounded.

Of course, the client's people do this themselves; we as consultants are simply enablers.

MCNews: What is the best way for consultants to use your book and its principles?

Paul: As is clear from what I just said, my view is that the consultant's job is to enable and then empower—the old adage of teaching people to fish rather than giving them fish. But what I have learned is that teaching in the classroom doesn't work. Consultants have to educate through the teams' experience during the journey. Clients have to go through the minefields themselves. That's why the story of the individual human struggles in the book is vital.

The analytical stuff that every consultant does is critical. But many consultants don't work proactively on the soft obstacles that are hidden under the rug or behind the curtain. These are highly political—the sacred cows—and you have to go at them from day one.

The only way you can pull that off is to subjugate your ego as a consultant to the welfare of your client. You have to go at the pace the client can handle. You can't lecture the client, and you can't convey the attitude that I, as a consultant, am smart and you, the client, are not. At the same time, you have to enable the client teams to arrive at high quality solutions.

MCNews: Thanks for taking the time to talk about your book.

Find out more about Dan Paul, his consulting company and his book at <http://www.gmtconsulting.com>.