

# Electric Maze Field Notes

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A client realized the need to better understand their organizational system, on both the business and human levels. They were particularly interested in understanding the organization on a human interaction level, where mental models, unwritten rules, habits and 'undiscussables' influence behavior.

We choose to begin our work with this client by introducing them to our "Systems Thinking" workshop. This workshop takes a group of 25-30 people on a guided tour of the future: individuals experience working in an organization where generative learning is the norm, and learn how creativity and incidental learning are engendered by curiosity, togetherness, forgiveness and trust.

The Systems Thinking workshop helps people to see the relationships between cause and effect, which are often separated by time and space, and to understand how delays and filters influence their perceptions of the world. We believe that people cannot learn from their actions unless they understand the nature and behavior of the systems in which they work, so we provide a framework for such discovery.

The Interel Electric Maze<sup>®</sup> is a natural addition to our workshop, as it creates a learning field where human interaction can be explored in real-time situations. Action learning activities using the Maze allow participants to immediately connect new learning with their experiences. This new knowledge then helps them to make choices that are more thoughtful in their lives.

Our three-day workshop incorporates two Electric Maze sessions, each designed to teach and reinforce multiple sets of integrated concepts.

The first Maze session follows two highly participative segments designed to accentuate the gap between "where we are" as an organization and "where we would like to be". In the first segment, we focus on the organization's current reality, and work together to articulate a description of the prevailing conditions. In the second segment, we co-create the organization's preferred future. Time is spent envisioning what that future would look like and how it would feel to work in an organization that is successful and supportive of individual growth. As the definitions of current reality and preferred future become more distinct, the gap between them becomes wider and wider. The desire to close this gap provides the creative tension and inspiration for new learning.

Though the challenge is then defined, it is understood that an organization cannot simply be thrown into unfamiliar territory simply because they choose to move from one reality to another; the journey must be taken with the utmost care. The choices made in an attempt to close the gap must, therefore, be made with the highest possible knowledge of systems and consequences.

Fueled by the vision of the preferred future, the group is put on the Maze. This first session imposes several conditions (such as competition and speed), which may be challenged by the group if they so decide. We usually set up a double-cross so that two teams complete by crossing from opposite ends of the Maze. In more advanced groups we may choose a pattern with a double back in it. Moreover, if a group appears to need more challenge we may alter the chosen pattern when they reach a certain place on the Maze. No talking is allowed during this exercise.

The debrief to this first Maze session is extremely important to the experience. It is conducted in a dialogue circle using a series of leading and open-ended questions. After we ask for initial reactions and feelings, we generally continue the debrief with question such as: "What happened?" "Why did it happen?" and "How does this relate to you and your organization?" The participants are then split off into small reflection groups to discuss how they might relate their Maze experience to a current organizational issue.

The participants then gather again, and the debrief continues to probe. "What was the purpose of this exercise?" "Why was there no talking allowed?" "Were you supported by your colleagues?" "What use is

knowledge of the current path across the Maze if it could change at random?" The goal of this conversation is to shift participant's thinking from "competition only" to seeing the entire process. We help them to see that the experience is about learning to learn, and that moving away from a current reality and towards a preferred future requires curiosity, togetherness, risk, and trust. They also come to understand that the process requires knowledge of human and business systems and for individuals and teams to link cause and effect. We point out that when verbal communication is not allowed in the activity, the non-verbal communications become easier to see. Since these factors have a powerful effect on personal and organizational performance, it is important for participants to become aware of the interpersonal forces constantly at play in their environments.

On the last day of our workshop, we put the group onto the Maze again, however this session is very different in its design. In the two days that have passed since the first Maze activity, the participants have spent a lot of time in reflection and dialogue. They have participated in process exercises that have taught them systems behavior, and have learned to identify recurring patterns of behavior. In this process, they have also come to understand that generative learning is not linear and that it is necessary for people to work together to create a shared vision.

The second Maze session challenges participants to practice what they have learned. We seat them in a circle around the Maze and tell them they have 45 minutes. They may use that time however they determine to be most useful. In that time, nothing is "wrong", and there is no hurry. They are then asked to consider what things are most important for them to do and to learn.

What transpires is very interesting. The entire group usually chooses to stay in dialogue about the learning and discovery process for a long time, often discussing their differences of opinion about the goals and purposes of the activity. After 30 minutes or so, they decide that working interdependently in a group mode of discovery will work best. At this point, they generally solve the Maze very quickly and they have fun doing it.

The lessons that are embodied in this workshop (and, more specifically, in the Electric Maze activities) surface repeatedly in subsequent sessions with clients. It is heartening to see that learning is carried forward by the participants and incorporated into future applications.

In each workshop, we improve on our facilitation of Electric Maze activities, and learn new ways to relate the Maze experience to current organizational needs. The possibilities with the Maze are seemingly limitless – while the hardware is fixed, the applications are as far reaching as one's imagination and curiosity can take them.