

## Diagnosing Human Systems: The Waterline Model

When a system is not achieving results or is doing so ineffectively, it is useful to inquire about what's going on "under the waterline" that may be keeping it stuck. Here are suggestions for inquiry, which is organized beginning with what is easiest to address and most impactful on system performance.

★★★Start Here:

**STRUCTURAL LEVEL:** Work at this level can often clear up problems that are showing up symptomatically at other levels.

- Is it clear who's in charge here? Is the leadership role being filled effectively?
- Does everyone understand what the goals are for the team or this piece of work?
- Does everyone agree on the goals?
- Are the team's priorities clear and agreed-upon?
- Are people clear about their own and each other's roles?
- Are the expectations clear? Does everyone know who is doing what and by when?
- Are people appropriately held accountable for meeting their expectations?
- Are the right people here to do the work? Is there a good fit between jobs and people?
- Are appropriate boundaries maintained so that acting out by individuals is contained?

★★★Then go here:

**GROUP PROCESS LEVEL:** Focuses on group dynamics, group processes, group's developmental level

- What developmental stage is this group at? Is the leader leading in a way appropriate to the group's developmental stage?
- Is the decision-making mode explicit and agreed-upon? Is it clear when the team has made a decision?
- Is everyone participating? Do some dominate while others withdraw?
- Do people have equal and appropriate levels of influence?
- Does the team have a method for solving problems in its work as well as its relationships?
- How does the group/ team address and manage issues of diversity?
- Does the team have explicit norms about how it will behave? Is it aware of norms that may be implicit? (Note: Implicit norms will often win out if there is a conflict between implicit/ explicit.)
- Does the team regularly assess itself in a way that leads to improvement?

★★★Next:

**INTERPERSONAL LEVEL:** Problems in a group often look like interpersonal issues. Sometimes they are, but they are more often the result of issues at the structural and/ or group processes level above

- Do members of this team communicate with each other openly and clearly? What supports open communication, or gets in the way of it?
- Are members able to separate facts from opinions or judgments - or do they confuse the two?
- How do group members handle conflict or differences when they arise? Avoid? Beat each other up? Let grudges hang on forever? Hang in with each other until resolved?
- Is feedback given and received freely and routinely for learning and clarity?

★★★Finally:

**INTRAPERSONAL LEVEL:** Hardest to address and often not the root cause of poor system performance

- Do members report out what they are thinking, feeling, and wanting or do they keep that information to themselves?
- Are members able to describe what is going on inside them or do they typically act it out in some way?
- Are members able to distinguish between what is their "stuff" and what is someone else's, or do they tend to blame and/ or get reactive with each other?