

In Memoriam: Geary Rummler

Geary Rummler was the real thing. There were not many people like Geary in the world of business process management. In a world increasingly dominated by radical management ideas and radical technological innovation, Geary was a researcher, writer and consultant who focused organizational change, management control and motivation. Geary was a methodologist whose methodologies were clear and thoughtful and based on systems models that provided depth and most important—they worked. Geary was a man who provided simple tools that influenced (tens of) thousands by providing those really interested in business process a way to model, really model, business processes.

I met Geary many times over the last few years on various business process venues. We shared a great many things, including a basic approach for understanding systems. He was often the keynote speaker at conferences dominated by technology companies and technological consultants—but he was only marginally interested in technology. His interest was the organization. He looked at the organization and saw business processes. He looked at the organization and he saw it as a system. He looked at the organization and saw feedback and control.\

Frederick Taylor, the father of what he called scientific management, has been credited by Peter Drucker as saving America from revolution during the last great depression by making American industry more productive and robust. Clearly, he and the Galbraiths provided a way of thinking about organizations, work and processes in ways that revolutionized management and business organization during enormously stressful times. Geary Rummler was one of the most successful researchers and consultants who saw organizations as classic “systems”.

Not only do organizations map inputs (resources) into outputs (products, services, etc.), Rummler pointed out, but to be successful, they must also have well thought out performance goals tied to management information and management control. Rummler maintained that organizational goals have to be translated into individual goals: goals for managers and workers from top to bottom. For those companies that listened, his consulting really did what most consultants only promise, his consulting helped them improve their performance.

Geary Rummler wrote only a few books, but those he wrote had weight and influence. His most important book, which he wrote with Alan Brache, was entitled, rightly enough, “Improving Performance”. It was a simple book that introduced the world to organizational maps and swimlane diagrams. It also had what I have always thought of as the world’s best subtitle: “Managing the whitespace in the organization chart.” The image conjured up by that subtitle is a concept that I have used over and over in my thinking and my consulting. Helping organizations manage the whitespace is what good process and systems consultants do.

Time after time, especially in large organizations, most of the functions that appear explicitly as boxes on the org chart are managed pretty well; but it is between the boxes,

between say “systems development” and “data base management” that the problem lies. Too often, important things fail to get done because there is no big picture that shows how the boxes fit together to get the big things done. Too often, important lines of communication get ignored because “it’s not my job”.

Geary understood the dynamics of systems better than anyone of our time. He was not as eloquent or as flamboyant as Stafford Beer, who also saw organizations as feedback systems, but he was a profound organizational thinker and a great communicator. He was also a gentleman. He will be missed.

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