

When It Comes to Organizational Change Efforts, Don't Wait for Others to Take the First Step



This post originally appeared on Berrett-Koehler Publisher's [blog](#).

The following is a modified excerpt from the latest edition of the Arbinger Institute's book, *The Outward Mindset: Seeing Beyond Ourselves*. Since its original publication in 2016, this book has become an international word-of-mouth phenomenon, selling more copies every year. The central insight—that the key to leadership lies not in what we do but in how we see—has proven to have powerful implications not only for organizational leadership but in readers' personal lives as well.

Meet Jack Huak, the Real-life Inspiration for Lou Herbert

If you've read *Leadership and Self-Deception* or *The Anatomy of Peace* you're familiar with the character Lou Herbert. In *The Outward Mindset*, we share the real-life story of Jack Hauck,

our inspiration for the Lou character. Jack was the founder and CEO of Tubular Steel, a national distributor of steel and carbon products. Tubular was trying to overcome toxic infighting that plagued the senior management team and stymied the growth of the entire company. After months of trying one approach after another without success, Jack asked a consultant if he knew of any other approach. The consultant was acquainted with Arbinger's work and recommended that Jack explore our ideas.

With any organization, our goal is to help it shift from an inward mindset to an outward mindset. With an inward mindset, we're self-focused and concerned about our objectives, goals, and worries. We see others primarily as objects: vehicles we can use, obstacles we can blame, or irrelevancies we can ignore. When we shift to an outward mindset, we become impact-focused. We see others as people—recognizing their objectives, goals, and worries—and take into account how we impact them. We've found that change models overlook this critical intervention and instead focus on changing behaviors. Although changing behaviors is part of the equation, we've found that this key component, mindset, is the catalyst for all future change efforts: mindset drives behavior, and changing behaviors translates to changes within yourself, your team, and your organization.

During our first meeting at Tubular Steel, we focused on helping each team member reassess his/her contribution to the company's challenges by carefully considering this statement: *As far as I'm concerned, the problem is me.* The purpose of this statement was to help the team members shift from a self-focused, inward mindset to an impact-focused, outward mindset, starting with considering how they were causing problems for those around them.

As eager as Jack was to solve his company's problems, he struggled to apply this statement to himself. Pointing his finger at the assembled executives, he said, "Don't forget: As

far as you're concerned, the problem is you." Eyes rolled. People dropped their shaking heads into their hands. It's so easy to remain inward and leave ourselves out of the equation when considering an organization's problems, even without realizing we're doing so.

Waiting for Others to Shift Their Mindset

Even though the issues at Tubular were not caused by any one person, it was clear that no problem could be solved if individuals were not willing to address how they were a part of the problem.

However, for many of us, admitting that we're part of the problem seems too personally risky, to the point that we would rather the company fail than admit and address our contribution to the problem. Most of us deflect responsibility because we fear the consequences. We take responsibility only when someone else is willing to be the first to admit that they are a part of the problem . . . without any assurance that others in the organization won't punish or blame them.

So while the goal for many organizations is to shift to an outward mindset, this is possible only if people are prepared to shift their mindset *with no expectation that others will change their mindsets in return.*

This capability—to change the way we see and work with others, whether or not they change—overcomes the biggest impediment to mindset change: the inclination to wait for others to change before doing anything ourselves. This is a common trap in organizations. Executives want employees to change, and employees wait on their leaders.

Everyone waits.

So nothing happens.

The Most Important Step in Organizational Change

Ironically, the most important step to accomplishing an organization-wide shift in mindset is the initial first step that one no one is taking.

Would our organizations be better off if we all shifted to an outward mindset? Yes. But this is possible only if some are willing to change even when others don't—and to sustain the change whether or not others reciprocate.

This kind of unilateral change is the essence of good leadership. Unfortunately, those who do this are too rare. Often, people don't take the initiative precisely because the inwardness of those around them gives them all the justification they need to sustain the belief that everyone else is the problem. At Tubular, Jack Hauck's inward mindset toward his leadership team provided them with every justification to further entrench themselves in the self-focused, protective, and frequently combative posture they adopted. This was particularly true for Jack's right-hand man and chief of staff, Larry Heitz.

Admitting That We're Part of the Problem

Unbeknownst to Jack, at the time of our first meeting with the team, Larry had made plans to leave Tubular Steel. After years of dealing with Jack, he had decided that enough was enough, and Jack would never change. The only sensible choice was to move on. Since Larry had learned that the head of sales felt the same way, they had begun quietly recruiting the company's best and brightest to defect and start a competitor organization. They all left shortly thereafter.

Shaken by Larry's departure, Jack began to consider how he might be complicit in the problems that plagued his company. He refocused the scrutiny he had once applied to his people on himself. He started to change, both at home and at work.

As Larry built his new company, he heard about the efforts Jack was making to change the way he engaged with others as a leader. This prompted Larry to consider all that he had learned from Jack while at Tubular—lessons that had proved vital in the success of his new company. With a promising prospective buyer for his company, Larry began to wonder what it might be like to rejoin Jack.

One year after Larry had left, he called Jack. "Jack, it's Larry," he said. "I've been thinking a lot since I left. You've invested a lot in me over the years, and everything I know, I learned from you. I've used what you've taught me to build my own company, and I think I could help you turn Tubular around. I don't know if you'd be willing to let me return, but I'd really like to come back and work together to try to save the company."

Remarkably, Jack agreed.

Larry returned and worked with a small Arbinger team, dedicating his full-time efforts to developing and implementing a systematic outward approach across the entire organization. As a result of this work, one person and department at a time began to shift mindsets. This took discipline. The change to an outward mindset doesn't happen overnight... but it won't even begin unless people are willing to be the first to change regardless of how others do or don't respond.

The Most Important Step Is to Take

the Most Important Step

A company that is committed to building an outward mindset culture will prepare and help people shift and maintain an outward mindset... even when others haven't yet made the shift.

When our goal is to achieve organization-wide changes, it's important to remember that the most important step starts with *me*.