Architectural Model:
# Building Coherence of Form and Function

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Recently I have heard from a couple of clients that it seems the work they do on a day-to-day basis just doesn't align with what they believe is important. They were really struggling with how to structure their work and workplaces so that they could do the work they believed was really important work rather than just what came up. Or they were struggling against a lack of coherence between what they believed was important and the work they had to do.

These conversations reminded me of a model we use to consider that alignment between what we believe and what we do—whether it is to explore new ways of working together or to examine what currently exists. We call it the **Architectural Model** because it's based in the saying that, "Form follows function."

In building a home or office space, the purpose a room is to serve (its function) sets the parameters for the structures that create that space. We don't ordinarily put an oven in a bedroom; nor do we try to build conference rooms that are the size of a hall closet. Form (structure) follows function. There should be a similar alignment in organizations. The operational and functional structures and constructs that dictate the work we do and that help us know how to communicate with each other, make decisions, and be accountable have to be aligned with who we are as an organization and what we hold to be important.

What we often find is that structures in organizations are there because of tradition or because that's the way they have always been, and that people continue to reinforce and strengthen those structures, even when they don't support the ways we want to function together.

We have also come to realize that in complex adaptive systems, alignment calls for us to function together in ways that help us to live out our beliefs. So we take the "Form follows function" saying to the next level: "Form follows function, which flows from what we believe to be important."
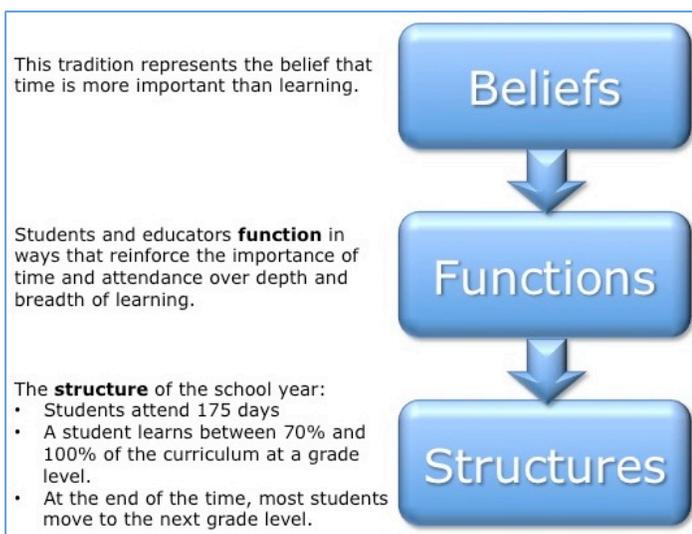
Looking at the model itself, I want to take you through an example I recognized years ago in my work in school reform. I like to use this example because it's one most everyone is familiar with. One of the traditional structures in education is the length of the school year. Across the US, a school year is made up of roughly 170-180 days, and for most students, the completion of that school year means they move to the next grade level. Take fourth grade as an example: In an average school district most fourth graders learn a generally set curriculum in that 175 days. It doesn't really matter, in the big scheme of things, if they learn 100% of that curriculum or 70% of that curriculum. When they have been there for 175 days and have at least 70%, they get to go to fifth grade. And in fifth grade the same conditions exist for the next 175 days of their school career.

This tradition represents the belief that time is more important than learning.

Students and educators **function** in ways that reinforce the importance of time and attendance over depth and breadth of learning.

The **structure** of the school year:
- Students attend 175 days
- A student learns between 70% and 100% of the curriculum at a grade level.
- At the end of the time, most students move to the next grade level.

So you have students and staff operating in a **structure** that forces them to **function** as timekeepers. They count the number of days left in a school year, tracking the days a student is absent at least as carefully as and probably more accurately than the learning that student is experiencing. Following the model, it would call for us to ask what **belief** drives that function. What always comes to mind for me is a belief that says, "Time spent in class is more important than what a student learns."

I have been working with and among educators for over 30 years, and I don't know any who believe that to be true. They believe that children can learn, and they recognize that different children learn at different rates, and they know that what a child learns is much more important in their future success than how much time they spend in school. And yet, educators are trapped in structures that force them to **function** in ways that violate their basic **beliefs** about learning and time.

What if we were to take the time to get clear on what we assume or believe about the core work we have to do, decide how we needed to function to do that core work, and then establish the structures, constructs, and expectations that support us in functioning in that way? In what ways would that release and amplify the creative tension in our human systems and trigger innovation? How different would our workplaces feel? How much more productive might we be? How much more sustainable and responsive would our organizations be?

Over time we have come to recognize some tips and traps to using this model, and they are important to consider here.

1. **Beliefs can be tricky to talk about.** Using this model does not call for extended word-smithing about flowery belief statements. It's just asking us to get clear about the basic beliefs or assumptions we carry about our work. What do we believe or value about customer service? What do we know from research about what constitutes effective practice? What do we consider to be important about how we treat people and get our work done?

2. **Belief statements are only of value if they lead to action.** So it's important to move from the discussion of what we believe about our work to a discussion of what that means about how we function together to live out those beliefs. This is one reason we work with groups to identify their simple rules. Those are the brief, generalizable action statements that inform interactions and decision making to build coherent patterns across the whole.

3. **A functioning system is made up of different types of structures that work interdependently to as we do our work.** When thinking about structures in a system, think about the

    a. Policies, procedures, activities, expectations that affect the work you do;

    b. Ways people connect and share resources and information;

    c. How and by whom decisions get made; and

    d. Who is accountable for what and how we hold each other accountable.

4. **This is both a model and a method for use in human systems.** As a model it can help us understand the relationship of beliefs to functions to structures, and how coherence along that flow is critical in a human system. As a model it can help us understand what currently exists in our system, much as I used it to explore the question of time in public educational structures. As a method, this image can also provide a path to follow as we think about how to restructure what exists or to build a new organization that is driven by what we know about our work and the relationships we want to establish.

We invite you to step into the Architectural Model, using it to examine the structures in your system. What alignment do you find? Where might you shift your current structures or establish new ones that help you function in ways that let you live out what you believe about the work you have committed to do. Join us in this journey and let us know what you discover that might help others.

Architectural Model of Organizations
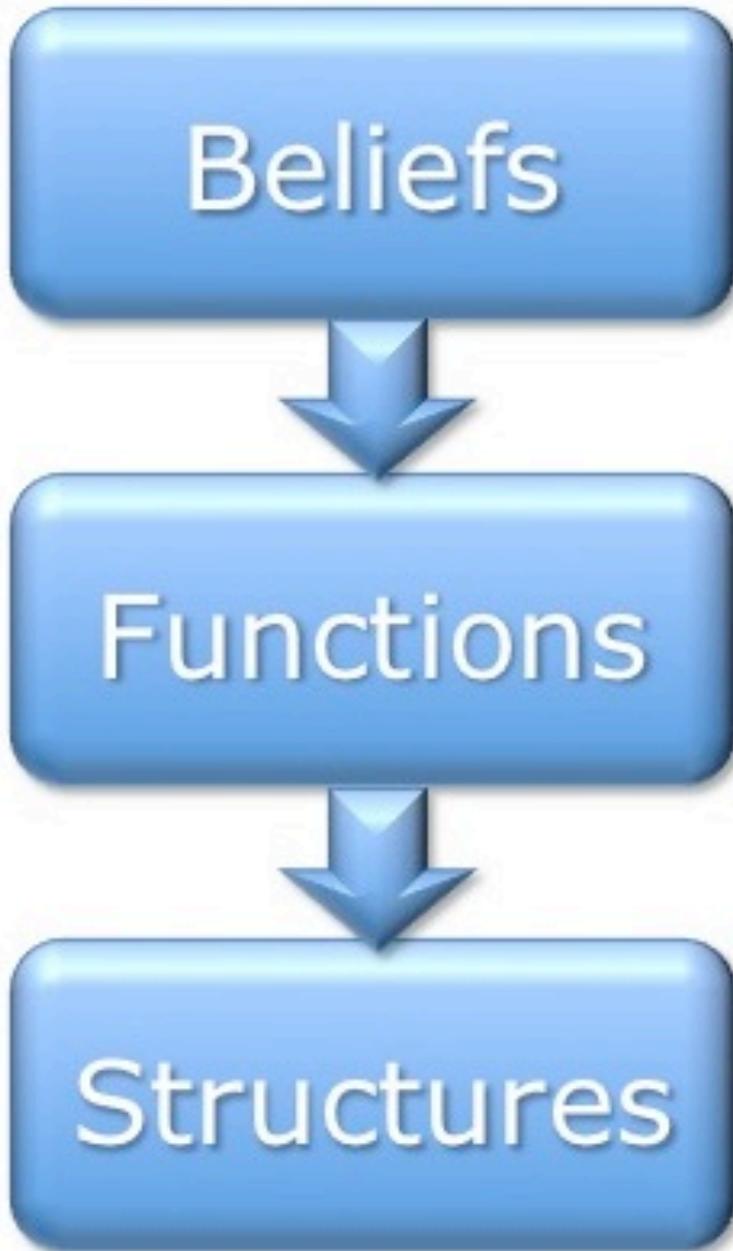
Beliefs

Beliefs about our core work inform our day-to-day actions. . .

Functions

by helping us know how to function together. . .

Structures

as we design structures that enable us to live out those beliefs.

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