
Avoiding the Dilbert Zone

■ *What do industry leaders like American Airlines, Black & Veatch, IBM, Helzberg Diamonds, and Consolidated Edison have in common? They've all turned to The Duncan Company to help their smart people work smarter.* ■

The Duncan Company, founded in Washington, D.C., 28 years ago, operates as a global consortium of world-class consultants.

Our primary focus is helping our clients avoid “the Dilbert Zone.”

Regardless of your business — whether it's high tech, low tech, manufacturing, retail, transportation, utilities or any other product or service — your success depends on the performance of your people.

And in the absence of a culture that goes beyond the buzz words and genuinely supports high performance, many people fall into dysfunctional behaviors just like the characters in the Dilbert cartoon.

Dilbert-like Behavior

Common examples of “the Dilbert Zone” include long and redundant meetings, missed deadlines, over-spent budgets, unnecessary paperwork, turf battles and miscommunication.

Meetings are often mistaken for work. Put eight or ten people around a table and it's amazing how little real work gets done unless and until there's a system that focuses the discussion on strategic objectives and holds people accountable for follow-through.

Most business meetings are longer than they should be and involve more people than necessary. Why? Because the previous meetings were also ineffective.

Nearly everyone complains about too many meetings. Then the common “solution” is to try to correct the problem by having more meetings. It

sounds crazy, but it's a symptom of some thing that all of us experience from time to time: smart people doing dumb things.

Root Causes of Poor Performance

In the business world, most performance problems can be traced to “systems issues,” not to lack of desire on the part of employees.

Most people genuinely want to perform well, and most of them are capable. When performance lags, it's always easy to blame it on the people, to assume poor attitude or even worse. That's what we call a “fundamental attribution error,” or failure to identify and correct the actual root causes.

The critical questions to ask are:

- How does the organization's “culture” either support or undermine the accomplishment of business objectives?
- How is strategy developed and how is it linked to tactics?
- How are the daily activities of individual employees and work groups linked to those strategies and tactics?
- Do people feel a sense of psychological ownership of the company's success, or do they work only for the pay check?
- Are they motivated by titles and parking privileges or by contribution and the opportunity to add value?
- What skills are missing?
- How do people hold themselves and each other accountable?
- How is performance monitored, measured and rewarded?

Getting a Grip on the Jello

For most business people, these issues fall under the category of the “soft stuff” that makes interesting conversation but is difficult to measure—sort of like trying to nail Jello to a wall.

So The Duncan Company developed a set of computer-based tools that make it possible to quantify (and then to help corporate executives *manage*) the “soft stuff” that can make or break a business. Our proprietary tools measure the effectiveness of individuals, of work groups and of the organization at large. Collectively, they track the cultural assumptions that drive attitudes that, in turn, drive performance.

Good News: No Need to Do It All

We believe most business people can make good decisions if they have the right information. “Part of the value The Duncan Company brings to the table is in providing decision making information. Asking the right questions is only half the job. The other half is to avoid asking the wrong questions. If you ask the wrong questions you'll still get data. But then you'll chase the wrong issues.

The bad news for business people is that they can't do it all. The good news is that they don't *need* to do it all. They simply need to do a handful of basic things really well. That requires strategic information on what is helping and what is hurting their business.



So what kind of “strategic information” contributes to top performance?

At **Black & Veatch**, where The Duncan Company has been helping with culture building and employee development since 1987, it once included a detailed “effectiveness profile” of the 50 top people in a British firm that Black & Veatch wanted to acquire. After seeing our report, B&V’s senior management team decided against the acquisition. Everything looked okay when the lawyers and accountants did their work. But when The Duncan Company performed the due diligence on the “soft stuff,” it was obvious that the British firm just wasn’t a good fit for Black & Veatch.

Not all companies are so lucky. Many mergers and acquisitions fail because cultural incompatibilities are detected too late.

(For more information on The Duncan Company’s work in strategic alignment, click on [Why Navigating Change Requires a Compass](#).)

At **Helzberg Diamonds**, a top-tier player in the nationwide retail jewelry industry, The Duncan Company assessed the organizational culture, then provided counsel on how to deal with challenges like employee turnover, boosting same-store sales and other things so critical to a national retailer. Helzberg is owned by billionaire investor Warren Buffett, well known for his insistence on effective management practices.

For **Eli Lilly**, the international pharmaceuticals firm, we recently used one of our proprietary tools to assess the effectiveness of a “team” of more than 400 people in the U.S., Great Britain, Spain and France. Our findings were used to help accelerate changes in a wide range of technologies and systems at the Indianapolis-based company.

For **Ferrellgas**, the largest propane distributor in the U.S., The Duncan Company is working on projects designed to help Ferrel continue its phenomenal growth without sacrificing the values and culture that got it where it is.

At U.S. agribusiness giant **Farm-land Industries**, we played a role in saving a company that was once on the

brink of disaster.

Jim Rainey, Farmland’s now-retired CEO, refers to The Duncan Company’s work in culture-building and performance management at Farmland as “a critically important contribution” to Farmland’s 12-month, \$207 million turnaround in profits. That turnaround is now a case study at the Harvard Business School.

(For more information on The Duncan Company’s work at Farmland, click on [Case Studies](#).)

From Classroom to Boardroom

Business consultants come in many stripes and every one has a story. Rodger Dean Duncan, who earned his doctorate in communication and organizational dynamics at Purdue University, started his consulting practice in 1972, after stints as an award-winning journalist and college professor. He was working on Wall Street for Texas entrepreneur Ross Perot when he was persuaded by friends in the Nixon administration to go to Washington and work as a full-time consultant to presidential cabinet officers.

He continued in that role in the Gerald Ford administration, then consulted for several U.S. Senators. In the federal government he witnessed scores of examples of “Dilbert Zone” behavior — smart people doing dumb things.

But his real interest was in business, not politics, so in the late 1970s he changed his focus to the corporate arena. That’s where he’s worked ever since, including tenure as head of worldwide communication for Campbell Soup Company and vice president of a *Fortune 500* energy firm.

Duncan’s reputation for make-a-difference service has provided a rite of passage to perhaps the highest level of his profession: personal coach to chief executive officers.

Today he serves in that capacity with the CEOs of several major companies and he treats those relationships with the same confidentiality accorded his former top secret clearance in government. All he’ll say about those assignments is that he helps with

strategy and performance issues and that it’s often the most satisfying part of his work.

A Partner, Not a Vendor

As a consortium of consultants who have worked in every level of politics and business, we’ve been on the receiving end of consulting services. So we know that some of the jokes about consultants can be true. Just as in medicine and law, there are good practitioners and there are bad ones. We work very hard to meet and exceed the expectations of our clients. We carefully diagnose *before* we prescribe. We don’t want to be a client’s vendor. We want to be the client’s *partner*. That kind of relationship and joint accountability are the formula for success.

And for a consulting practice that’s still going strong after nearly three decades, the formula obviously works.

Dilbert-like behavior and performance are something worthy of avoiding.

We can help.

(See also [What Our Clients Say](#))

