

## The shortest link | The Xpragmatic View



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While trying to address the needs of less developed communities and countries, we must forget about high-profile all-embracing programs, but instead focus on smaller, local initiatives whereby local organisations and companies act as the mentors and the facilitators for the development of such community. Is this enough?

## The Tällberg Foundation and Dr. Russell L. Ackoff

Recently, Jim McKinley, President of Excellence in Leadership, made me aware of a lecture delivered by Dr. Russell L. Ackoff on the occasion of the 25th Annual Tällberg Forum, which recognised him for the "consistent application of humanistic values, rigorous logic, and the highest standards of personal integrity in his professional work and personal relations."

The full text of his speech can be found [here](#). 

The [Tällberg Foundation](#) is a non-profit organisation established in 1981 whose mission is to deepen our understanding of issues related to leadership and change in society and business. The Foundation's main focus of activity is to gather leaders from around the world and from a variety of backgrounds for discussions and reflection.

Dr. Russell L. Ackoff is the Anheuser-Busch Professor Emeritus of Management Science, the Wharton School, and Distinguished Affiliated Faculty, Center for Organizational Dynamics, both at the University of Pennsylvania. He authored twenty-two books, most recently "Beating the System" (2005) and "Redesigning Society" (2003).

In his speech, Dr. Ackoff argues that in order to address the needs of the less developed parts of our society, we must allow, facilitate and promote the self-development of these countries and communities. Thereby, we must avoid initiating the traditional high-level and all-embracing programs, but rather start with smaller initiatives that group a local community and some organisations or companies that are linked to this community or are located in their direct neighbourhood.



**Beating the System**  
 Using Creativity to  
 Outsmart Bureaucracies  
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## The shortest link

I think there are several very valid points in this speech of Dr. Ackoff. Still, I fear this will not make the day either.

I am not an expert in any of these matters, but my personal theory on this is that no lasting improvement will result from tactical initiatives that are "added" to a community, whatever the good intentions they are based on. The community itself has to own and build the improvement process.

As we can read in his speech, Dr. Ackoff is well aware of this. However, it is not enough involving a number of local groups or organisations. The improvement has to happen first at the level of the "shortest link", the direct interaction between individuals.

To some extent, Dr. Ackoff is trying to achieve this by going for rather small-scale initiatives, involving people, organisations and companies that all live or are located in the same neighbourhood. This brings the development process closer to the shortest link level, but it remains a top-down approach. Consequently, too great parts of the system remain unbalanced since the approach insufficiently takes into account the reality of the many.

This reality is that the society we live in has developed a huge amount of constructs that steer or influence our life. Examples of such constructs are local and national governments, laws, markets, companies...

Nearly all of these are necessary constructs, allowing large communities to peacefully live and interact together. Yet, increasingly, many of these constructs are no longer balanced with the needs and the rights of the many.

In [Innovation by design](#), I describe some of my thoughts on this, more specifically in the context of the organisational structure of companies.

Today's enterprises are prime examples of unbalance. To get an idea on this, you just have to compare today's "weight" (read: importance) of an employee, who more or less puts at risk his whole income and family security, to that of the shareholder who barely puts some of the money at risk he has too many of anyway.

Too much things in our current society are tied together by "brute force", serving the rights of the few.

As a result, top-down approaches will always incorporate too much of this unbalance. Sooner or later, minor internal or external changes will make the improvement initiative fall apart since the very basic structure remains unbalanced.

## Building at the bottom

Therefore, my personal credo is: "Forget about transformation, empowerment, improvement initiatives, acceleration of whatever or any other type of top-down approach... Just do your best and improve."

Do your best improving every link you have with any other human, be it your wife, your children, your neighbours, your colleagues, your employees... Try to assess what is the current "balance" of the link you have with them. Is there reasonableness? Is there fairness? Is there trust? Then improve. Don't change the world. Improve yourself.

Will this be enough? Well, unfortunately, while in theory such bottom-up improvement process can be extremely contagious and rapidly spreading, common sense makes me to say that it will not be enough.

Too many of the constructs that we mentioned above will block progress and development at the larger scale. That's the reality.

Therefore, our only hope is that this process can be initiated at the level of some more "empowered" people who are directly influencing the life and the thinking of the many. Individual people, not the organisations they are part of.

Is this a realistic expectation? I doubt it.

Life in general has a remarkable capacity to find balance, to replicate good behaviour and to develop approaches that are beneficial to the many. Unfortunately, this process has many outgrows that favour the benefits of the few. Greed is today's religion.

Today, we humans have implemented too many structures that violate the basics of the balance for the many. The people who are in the best position to start the improvement process are



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unlikely to do so. No program will remedy this. We can accept this and further evolve towards the ant society or we can retry again starting at the bottom. Life and human development are a complex process that is not guaranteed to be easy nor smooth.

## About the author



Marc Buyens is analyst, management consultant and owner of Xpragma. Marc started Xpragma in 1999 after a 20+ years career in the IT sector. Today, he provides advice, training and mentoring services focusing on the intersection of technological evolution, organisational change and business strategy: a messy world of unfulfilled promises.

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