

“Organizational dysfunctions act as a dripping faucet wasting organizational resources. The problem with the dysfunctions is not that they cannot be fixed, but rather that they are hidden.”

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# Why the Socio-Economic Approach to Management Remains a Well Kept Secret

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In my judgment, most of [the consulting advice on organizational change] is – most of the time – simply not actionable. And even if it is implemented correctly, it will lead to consequences that run counter to the intentions of those providing it. (Argyris, 2000, p. 3)

It is not a secret that many organizational change efforts fail. “Even with dozens of change models developed and countless changes implemented, in a study of 210 North American businesses, Smith (2002) found that 75% of initiatives fail to make an impact” (Raelin & Cataldo, 2011, p. 482). This is true not only for North America. British scholars found that, “Major organisational change requires huge investments in energy, time and resources, but many change programmes fail to meet expectations. Published estimates of success levels can be as low as 10%” (Oakland & Tanner, 2007, p. 1). The failures of organizational change both lead to and stem from the lack of employee engagement. The Gallup report, *The State of the American Workplace: Employee Engagement Insights for U.S. Business Leaders*, indicated that 70% of American workers are not fully engaged in their work.

Given such a failure rate in changing organizations and engaging employees, one would expect that a highly successful method for improving organizational effectiveness, profitability, and morale would be a hot news item. Instead, the method is almost unknown in the US.

We refer to the Socio-Economic Approach to Management (SEAM), which since 1973 has had a remarkable track record in helping organizations become more efficient, more profitable, and happier. According to SEAM founder Henri Savall, in over 1,300 organizational interventions, carried out by the consultants from the *Institut de socio-économie des entreprises et des organisations* (ISEOR) in Lyon, France, only two have failed (H. Savall, personal communication, October 13, 2014). One reason for such a success rate is that ISEOR is very careful about choosing its clients; they turn down around half of the prospective clients. However, other reasons include specific philosophical and practical premises. In this paper, we explore why, in our opinion, SEAM is so effective, and speculate on why SEAM is far from the public awareness.

## SEAM

Socio-Economic Approach to Management, developed by Savall and his colleagues in Lyon, France, provides an alternative to traditional management. It helps to look at SEAM conceptually, philosophically, and practically. Conceptually, SEAM is based on the work of the founders of organization development, such as Kurt Lewin, Rensis Likert, Douglas MacGregor, and Chris Argyris (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2011a). Savall, who was interested in OD but also had an accounting background, realized that modern accounting does not measure around 40% of what happens financially in an organization. He called this 40% *hidden*

costs (Savall & Zardet, 2008). US accounting standards currently do not allow for the recognition of these hidden costs in the financial statements. However, without this additional information, leaders are deciding with grossly incomplete data. Savall created his approach to organizational change as a response to flawed management theory and incomplete accounting theory; and in this approach, calculating hidden costs became one of the cornerstones of SEAM interventions.

Philosophically, SEAM might look like an approach with two foci – people (socio) and financial results (economic). In reality, the focus is one, which is symbolized by a hyphen in the word socio-economic. From a linguistic perspective, one of the hyphen's functions is to join two ordinarily separate words in one single word. Therefore, the "socio-economic" becomes a single word and thus the only focus of SEAM; it is like a coin with the two sides. Henri Savall likes to hand a quarter coin to people who ask him about SEAM. He first holds it with George Washington's profile up, "What do you see here? A human. This is socio." Then he turns it and exposes the other side with the words "one quarter dollar" on it, "What do you see now? Money, or economics. The whole coin is socio-economic. The sides do not work without each other." His point is that one cannot separate the people side from the economic side without creating a distortion.

Practically, the ideas that shape SEAM appear very reasonable, almost common sense, yet they are rarely seen in practice. In a quick summary, these ideas are: (a)

**Employees' participation is essential for effective organizations. In fact, SEAM is based on the premise that the source of adding value to an organization is in developing human potential. This is a direct challenge to the more common beliefs that the source of value added is capital (neo-classical economics) or labor (Marxist economics). In SEAM theory, the heart of enriching an organization lies in developing its people. When people develop, they are more engaged, and more willing to contribute to the organization's well-being.**

Table 1. Average Hidden Costs in 1991

	SECTOR OF ACTIVITY	PER PERSON PER YEAR
Industry	Electronics	\$60,000
	Metallurgy	\$23,400
	Glassworks	\$46,400
	Household appliances	\$15,600
	Agro-food	\$14,300
	Bank	\$22,100
Services	Telecommunication Maintenance	\$20,800
	Municipal government	\$10,400
	Major distribution	\$11,700

organizational dysfunctions lead to hidden costs, (b) an organization's task is to develop human potential, and (c) poor management is a major dysfunction. Let us explore them.

**Organizational dysfunctions and hidden costs.** Any organization has to perform a certain set of functions. If a function does not work properly, it becomes a dysfunction. Modern organizations tend to have many dysfunctions and this is normal, given the need to coordinate the people and the processes. However, the more dysfunctions, the less effective the organization. Organizational dysfunctions act as a dripping faucet wasting organizational resources. One problem with the dysfunctions is not that they cannot be fixed, but rather that they are not measured by traditional accounting.

The other problem with the dysfunctions is that people stop seeing them. The old metaphor of a frog in boiling water comes to mind. Even if at first dysfunctions can be an irritant, people get used to the dysfunctions and do not see them anymore or even believe that the state of things is normal. Meantime this "normal state of things" has an average hidden cost of over \$20,000 per employee per year (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2011a). Hidden costs can take different forms and can pertain either to the present or to the future. For example, hidden costs such as wasted resources, wasted time, lost income, or lost opportunities can be tracked in the present. Failing to prepare employees and the organization for work in the future or avoiding potential problems and ignoring risks are examples of hidden costs that may happen in the future. The amount of hidden costs depends on the organization. As a rule of thumb, the bigger and more technologically advanced the organization is, the more hidden costs occur. *Table 1* shows the difference in terms of industry. While the data are 25 years old, the trend is still accurate, and one can imagine that the amount today would be much higher.

**Human potential.** Often, when something does not work in an organization, the tendency is to blame an individual, or those who "do not measure up." However, through the lens of systems theory, the problem is the organization, not the individual. The unhealthy system is the

Table 2. *Differentiating Interpretive and Positivistic Case Study*

ELEMENT	INTERPRETIVE CASE STUDY	POSITIVISTIC CASE STUDY
Philosophical Premise	Social constructionism: reality does not exist separately from the researcher. Every action of the researcher impacts the subject of research.	Objectivism: reality is objective, unchanging, measurable, and exists separately from the researcher. Actions of the researcher do not impact the reality. (Note - Post-positivism accepts social constructionism, but follows the procedures of positivism.)
Focus of Inquiry	Bounded system (case).	Bounded system (case).
Research Design	Begins with researcher's open mind to explore the unknown.	Begins with a theory to be tested.
Methods of Data Collection	Mostly interviews; questions are very open and may change with different participants to yield more rich data.	Research protocol is the same for all participants. Questions are designed to test the elements of the theory.
Generalization of Findings	Not possible.	Applied to theory, not larger population, called analytical generalization.
Validity	Achieved through tactics like member check to make sure one understood correctly and data triangulation.	Replications of the same study.
Researcher's Bias	Researcher's bias is disclosed and dealt with through the means of memo writing, journaling, peer reviewing.	The assumption is that bias does not exist, or is taken care of by a rigorous protocol.

problem; and thus blaming, or fixing individuals, will not fix the system. Most workers want to do well, and they are willing to contribute to the success of their organizations. When workers are respected and allowed to participate in improving their workplace, they take an ownership of their work and the workplace thrives. Employees' participation is essential for effective organizations. In fact, SEAM is based on the premise that the source of adding value to an organization is in developing human potential. This is a direct challenge to the more common beliefs that the source of value added is capital (neo-classical economics) or labor (Marxist economics). In SEAM theory, the heart of enriching an organization lies in developing its people. When people develop, they are more engaged, and more willing to contribute to the organization's well-being.

**Poor management is a major dysfunction.**

Treating people respectfully in the workplace actually starts with good management. Yet in our consulting practice, we often see organizations that are managed poorly, which in turn leads to high hidden costs. Poor management is not the fault of the individual managers, it is both a

system's failure and the result of the dominant mental model about management in the western world (Heorhiadi, A., Conbere, J. P., & Hazelbaker, C., 2014).

It is not a secret that often people are being promoted to managerial positions based on their technical skills. Somehow there is a belief that if a person is a good teacher (physician, lawyer, or...), the person will be a good manager. However, being a good professional does not automatically make people good managers, as knowing and managing a business process is different than managing people. In our practice, we encounter many managers and supervisors not only without any managerial training and knowledge of management tools, but also with little elementary training in interpersonal communication or conflict management. On the other hand, being an MBA graduate does not guarantee that the person can manage people well. One of the SEAM's tasks is to train and sometimes to re-train managers, so they are effective in their role of steering people toward organizational strategic goals.

**Intervener-researchers.** One of the unique aspects of SEAM is its rich research

foundation. Since 1973, ISEOR has conducted over 1,300 interventions, each of which is also a case study and part of their research data base. This understanding is shared by the clients and the contract stipulates that the data, although in anonymous manner, will be added to ISEOR's body of knowledge. Thus, when ISEOR makes a claim that hidden costs are \$23,000 per person per year, they have the data to support their claim. All SEAM practitioners are trained to be *intervener-researchers*, who serve two functions. First, the interveners lead the intervention according to the process, developed and tested by ISEOR, and second, they collect and analyze data to add to the research data base of ISEOR. In this way, the gap between practice and theory (Bartunek, 2007, 2011; Kuchinke, 2004; Hutton & Liefoghe, 2011; Markides, 2011; Moats & McLean, 2009) is perfectly bridged in the SEAM approach. SEAM *intervener-researchers* are practitioners and scholars. Merging theory and practice is their daily task.

The research methodology that is used in the SEAM research is the positivistic case study (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2011b) as described by Yin (2014). This is different

from the more common interpretive case study in which one explores a case to see what is happening in the situation. In positivistic research, one constructs a theory, and then tests to see if the theory is supported (see *Table 2*). With a positivistic case study, validity is not demonstrated by statistical generalization to a population, but by analytical generalization to a theory: The more replications there are, the more one can trust that the theory is valid. All 1,300 plus SEAM interventions can be considered replications of the original

**SEAM works with whole system change. It begins with the top leaders, and then cascades through the organization to reach all employees. In this manner, leaders demonstrate their ability to identify and correct dysfunctions, safely, without blame or retaliation, before employees are asked to do the same. In the first year of a typical SEAM intervention, the leaders and two or three silos (departments, divisions) are part of the intervention. Each year two or three more silos are added, until the whole organization has been involved.**

Savall theory. Since the theory development in the 1970s, every intervention that served as a research case study contributed to the theory's robustness. Some modifications and elaborations have been made over time, yet the core theory has been supported over and over. We know of no other research on organizational change that has been as extensive as that of ISEOR.

#### **How the SEAM Intervention Works**

A SEAM intervention is a combination of three simultaneous processes: (a) the intervention itself, in which dealing with the whole system by following a rigorous process is paramount; (b) teaching leaders and managers about the socio-economic management, which includes learning the principles of SEAM and six simple management tools; and (c) coaching leaders through the series of organizational changes and making sure these changes are in accord with political and strategic goals of the organization. We would

like to briefly comment on each of these processes.

**Intervention.** SEAM works with whole system change. It begins with the top leaders, and then cascades through the organization to reach all employees. In this manner, leaders demonstrate their ability to identify and correct dysfunctions, safely, without blame or retaliation, before employees are asked to do the same. In the first year of a typical SEAM intervention, the leaders and two or three silos (departments, divisions)

are part of the intervention. Each year two or three more silos are added, until the whole organization has been involved.

This systemic nature is obvious not only in working with the whole organizational system, but also in the way the intervention is carried out. The intervention is conducted by a team of intervener-researchers, with guidance from experienced SEAM intervener-researchers, so an immense amount of experience and expertise go into shaping each intervention. This is not a matter of a small team of consultants interacting with an organization, it is the interaction of two systems.

Process-wise, the intervention is similar to Lewin's classic action research, in which one gathers data from participants, analyzes the data, feeds it back to participants, and then assists them to solve organizational problems. There are some differences with SEAM. The first difference pertains to calculating hidden costs, in other words, attaching a financial figure to things that do not work. Leaders like numbers, and when they see how much

money some dysfunctions cost them, they are more eager to invest time and energy into the most expensive issues. Second, after the data collection (which is called a diagnostic phase), the feedback session is split into two sessions with very different goals. At the first session, the feedback consists only of employees' quotes addressing key dysfunctions and presenting the cost of each dysfunction. During the second session, which usually happens a month later, the interveners share their perspectives and provide analysis, followed by suggestions of potential improvement projects. Splitting the feedback session in two allows participants to separate raw data and its interpretation. Separating the sessions in time helps the client to absorb the information, live with it for a while, without jumping into a quick fix of superficial problems.

**Teaching.** Teaching and educating leaders and managers about the principles and the process of SEAM is a second aspect of a SEAM's process. Additionally, the SEAM interveners train a few internal interveners, who later become "flame keepers" of the process. Both teaching and preparing internal interveners play important roles in sustaining the change effort. Teaching managers six management tools increases the quality of management and frees the managers' time to do their important job, managing, or steering the division they manage.

**Coaching.** The last aspect, and perhaps most important, is coaching leaders and managers through the process. One can imagine that any change process raises a lot of questions, confusion, and anxiety. The coaching process is designed to help managers align changes (such as restructuring, developing new policies, designing training, etc.) in their units with bigger strategic goals of the organization. We also found that along with the substantive aspect, which is aligning events happening in the change process, coaching provides emotional and psychological benefits to managers. Managers, who are being coached, often feel valued, supported, and appreciated.

Table 3. Reduction in Hidden Costs in the Transportation Department in 2013 and 2014

	HIDDEN COSTS MARCH 2013	HIDDEN COSTS MARCH 2014	SAVINGS
Mechanics	\$284,352	\$231,223	\$ 53,129
Office	\$134,875	\$73,578	\$ 61,121
Drivers	\$276,780	\$226,832	\$ 49,948
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$696,007</b>	<b>\$531,633</b>	<b>\$161,198</b>
Wasted student hrs	123,729 hrs	107,884 hrs	15,845 hrs

Table 4. Hidden Costs in the Lebanese Hospital Group

SECTOR	HOSPITAL	NUMBER OF PERSONS	YEARLY HIDDEN COSTS (\$)	AVERAGE HIDDEN COST PER PERSON PER YEAR
Operating room	H1	40	\$484,300	\$12,100
Intensive care	H1	27	\$389,100	\$14,400
Integral	H3	150	\$848,300	\$5,600
Maternity	H2	20	\$361,100	\$18,000
Emergency	H2	20	\$794,600	\$39,700

Table 5. Change in the Hourly Contribution to Value Added on Variable Costs (HCVAVC)

HCVAVC	HOSPITAL 1	HOSPITAL 2	HOSPITAL 3	AVERAGE
2010	\$16.22	\$10.51	\$13.20	\$13.80
2011	\$16.52	\$11.82	\$13.54	\$14.22
2012	\$17.00	\$12.48	\$14.00	\$15.00
2013	\$23.00	\$14.00	\$17.00	\$19.00

### Examples of Success

It is said that one picture can be worth thousands of words, so we would like to illustrate the kinds of results that come from a SEAM intervention. One case is based on an intervention in a transportation center of a large public school system in the US. The second case is based on the intervention in three hospitals in Lebanon. The selection

of cases shows that the results of intervention do not depend on industry or national culture.

**The transportation center.** The department had around 125 employees, most of whom were part time bus drivers, plus office staff, mechanics, and a few managers. Initially there were problems with communication, morale, and turnover. Keeping costs low was always a concern. The SEAM

intervention ran from 2012 to 2014. For the budget of \$7,000,000, the hidden costs were calculated at almost \$700,000.

Results of the intervention can be regarded as qualitative, quantitative, and financial. Qualitative results were evident in the improvement of employee morale and communications. Employees said their ideas were heard and felt more valued. Quantitative and financial results included, but were not limited to, reduction of accidents (17%), less turnover, less conflict, and reduction of hidden costs. Overall, the savings in hidden costs in the first full year after beginning the intervention showed a reduction of \$161,198, or 23% of the total hidden costs for the areas involved in projects of dysfunctions reduction (see Table 3).

**Lebanese hospitals.** In Lebanon, three hospitals, run by a Roman Catholic order of sisters, began the SEAM intervention in 2010 (Tabchoury, 2015). There were 1,000 employees and an annual total revenue of \$40,000,000. Externally the hospitals had many challenges, including the unstable political climate and fierce competition. Internally there were unresolved conflicts between the sisters and the management of the hospitals, high employee turnover, miscommunication between physicians and management, and shrinking number of patients. Hidden costs that were identified are shown in Table 4.

In 2014, the rate of satisfaction from internal and external patients rose from 76% to 91%. The number of patients rose from 70,000 to 80,000. Overtime hours decreased 70%. Over the 4 years, the hospitals reduced hidden costs and improved performance, and the increased added value for the 3 years was about \$10,000,000. This change was calculated through a standard SEAM practice, the Hourly Contribution to Value Added on Variable Costs (HCVAVC) (see Table 5).

The growth each year in Hourly Contribution to Value Added on Variable Costs demonstrates the cumulative effect of SEAM intervention. Each year the HCVAVC grew as employees became increasingly able to apply the Socio-Economic Approach to Management.

## Why SEAM is Not Widely Practiced in the US

So why then is SEAM not widely known and practiced in the US? One reason for the lack of public awareness of SEAM is that this approach is a French creation. SEAM was developed by Savall and his colleagues in Lyon, and the majority of the interventions have been conducted in Europe. The original writing about SEAM was in French, and it was years before the books and articles were translated into English. Teaching about SEAM was mostly in French and Spanish. This, perhaps, explains why many more SEAM

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interventions are done in francophone countries and Mexico than in the English speaking world.

Yet, even in France, despite its high reputation among business people and corporate CEOs who implemented SEAM, the SEAM approach is not a mainstream approach to management. A reason lies in a division between the academy and practice in France. Academics are expected to stay in the academy and wrestle with conceptual issues and not meddle in the field. For some French academics, the work of intervener-researchers is not acceptable, since it is adulterated with practice, and so not academically pure. Consulting, in turn, is believed to be the domain of application; so business people see academics as people who do not know how things work in real-life. So there is a built-in chasm between research and practice.

We also surmise that SEAM is not widely spread in the US for the same

reason it is not being well-accepted in France. SEAM requires that an organization's leaders understand and practice socio-economic management. Most organizations or leaders are not able or willing to do so. The dominant mental model of management (Heorhiadi, Conbere, & Hazelbaker, C., 2014) is a century old, is still taught in management schools, and is assumed by the great majority of leaders. According to this model, employees are a commodity, human capital, which in the time of crisis should be disposed of. This "disposal of human capital" is antithetical to the moral and spiritual premises of SEAM.

Ironically, SEAM meets the espoused beliefs of many managers and leaders. SEAM analyzes hidden costs, creates an exchange of information among all parts of an organization, and increases employee morale, all of which are very desirable. In spite of the fact that many managers say they need effective processes, good communications, and organizational climate, these same managers, when faced with the need to change, find excuses to maintain the status quo, or use a Band-Aid when serious interventions are needed. Their desire to keep status-quo is understandable; because in order to embrace SEAM, the organization has to enter into a period of transformational change, change that involves changing one's beliefs and the actions produced by these beliefs.

As we wrote elsewhere on how to be a learning organization (Heorhiadi, LaVenture, Conbere, 2014), the organization had to be willing to develop the intellectual and

emotional ability "to create an environment, in which people examine their basic assumptions safely; which in turn, calls for developing the intellectual and emotional muscles that will allow people to release large quantities of basic anxiety from time to time" (Heorhiadi, LaVenture, & Conbere, 2013, p. 8). Any significant organizational change often involves transformational learning, which takes some time. The American model of change is often short term, precluding significant transformational learning.

Another reason, which we believe is significant in the lack of attention to SEAM, is the research methodology used by the approach. We previously mentioned that ISEOR, without naming it, uses a positivistic case study methodology, which works well in unique, complex, and changing situations, like human organizations. The methodology calls for testing theory through multiple case studies, or replications, to see if the theory is supported. Using this methodology, a researcher cannot generalize findings to the larger population, like in other positivistic methodologies. It is possible to apply research findings to the theory, in other words to provide an analytical generalization.

At some point, through replications, one can make a claim that the theory seems to be valid. This is what happens in ISEOR. Each consulting case can be viewed as the opportunity to test the evolving theory, developed from analyzing the previous cases (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2011b). Many scholars are not familiar with positivistic case study methodology and as a result, we suspect the validity and strength of the SEAM research is frequently discounted.

Finally, there have only been a few programs in the US that teach about SEAM. Courses are offered at Benedictine University, Colorado Tech, and the College of St. Scholastica. At this time, we know only of three programs that teach students to practice SEAM: New Mexico State University, Western Carolina University, and the SEAM Institute.

## Conclusion

SEAM is an effective intervention that has demonstrated that it can reduce hidden costs, develop human potential, and improve morale and profitability. It is most effective when the intervention involves the entire organizational system. We acknowledge that for SEAM to work, the organization must be ready to accept the changes in management that is at the heart of the SEAM process. Perhaps it is time for organizations in the US and Canada to explore the effectiveness of SEAM.

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