

# When the Going Gets Tough

We at Approach Inc. changed almost everything about the company – including its organizational structure, culture, processes, and work environment – in our pursuit of that elusive beast of legend, the true "learning organization." Along the way, we met with much success – and some setbacks as well. This paper illustrates our experiences in applying our theories.

Our aim in transforming Approach was to become the model for all business in the future, resolving the problems inherent in existing best-practice models. As a successful consulting company poised for rapid growth, with large cash reserves and a staff of a few dozen of the smartest, most daring and creative people we could find, we felt that no one could be better positioned to take on the challenge.

Since our aim was to resolve the problems inherent in existing models of management, and it was our position that those problems could not be fixed by tweaking or adjusting those traditional models (hence the use of the word inherent), we felt that we would need to replace them entirely. We sought out thought leaders with ideas that cut against the grain of traditional management practices.

We made sweeping changes in the way our organization was structured and run. We educated people in the change process itself, so they were better able to participate. In partnership with a large furniture manufacturer and an architectural firm, we even redesigned our physical workspace to support and enable our new ways of interacting. Finally, we developed a core philosophy that encompassed our new paradigms, and named it "Our Approach." The atmosphere was one of excitement, openness, and collaboration. We had the sense that we were true pioneers with noble destinies awaiting us all. Then one day it all fell apart in the space of 48 hours.

We learned many things during our days of glory, and even more during the dark days that followed. Perhaps most importantly, we learned that what we tried to achieve can be achieved; but at the same time, we gained an appreciation for how difficult true transformation can be, even under circumstances that would at first appear to be ideal.