

**ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION FROM THE INSIDE OUT:
REINVENTING THE MIT CENTER FOR ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING**

by Jeff Clanon

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No management issue has generated more attention and experimentation over the past two decades than how organizations can successfully initiate and sustain change. Yet the process of actually transforming an organization—that is, changing not only the organization's structure and practices, but also the thinking and the quality of interaction among the people who comprise it—is still not widely understood, and, in fact, remains a relatively rare occurrence.

Many organizations are engaged in efforts to improve performance by some combination of accelerating innovation, operating more efficiently, containing costs, becoming more agile, focusing on the customer, and improving employee morale. Despite all this effort, as VISA co-founder Dee Hock points out, we still have an epidemic of institutions that are unable to achieve their purpose: schools that can't teach, unhealthy health care systems, welfare systems in which few fare well, communities that can't communicate, corporations that can't cooperate or compete, and governments that can't govern.¹

My own early experience with organizational change is perhaps not atypical. Working for a large, high-tech corporation, I participated in a dozen or so change efforts over a 15-year period. My sense was that all that really changed was the organization's formal structure and the span of control of a few managers. More fundamental issues, such as the desired increase in business performance, the quality of daily interactions, and how people felt about working for the company remained remarkably unchanged. In fact, employee morale usually decreased following each effort. The joke became, "If you don't know what to do—reorganize!"

As a result of these experiences, I became increasingly skeptical about whether "transformation" in an organizational context was even possible. Paradoxically, they also generated in me a deep desire to understand how meaningful and sustainable change can occur in organizational settings, and why it is so difficult to achieve.

¹ Dee Hock's ideas on new ways of organizing proved central to our work reinventing the MIT Center for Organizational Learning, as this article will show.

Work conducted over the past eight years at the MIT Center for Organizational Learning (now the Society for Organizational Learning), where organizational learning and change is the focus of research, has shed new light on these questions. Beginning in 1991, sixteen projects have been launched to understand the impact of organizational learning concepts, methods, and tools on change initiatives in business settings. Most have resulted in significant—and in some instances, fundamental—change. They have proved that change is indeed possible! However, it has been the work on the redesign and eventual reinvention of the Center itself that provided for me both the inherent challenges and an experiential understanding of a process that produced transformative results.

What follows is the story of the change process at the MIT Center for Organizational Learning, including the context for the process, why it was undertaken, the key conceptual models that guided it, the results, the lessons learned, and the implications for achieving fundamental change in other organizations.² I focus on this particular example in the hope that it will serve to illuminate some of the key issues that must be addressed and capabilities we will need to develop if we are to succeed in building organizations that are truly worthy of our commitment.

THE CONTEXT FOR THE PROCESS

In 1991, the Center for Organizational Learning was founded as a sponsored research center at the MIT Sloan School of Management by a group of colleagues including Peter Senge, Daniel Kim, Janet Gould and Bill Isaacs. The Center was organized as a collaboration of corporations, working in partnership with MIT researchers, to undertake serious experiments in the area of organizational learning and to advance the state of the art of building learning organizations. The initial focus was on developing new learning capabilities in the areas of systems thinking, collaborative inquiry into tacit mental models, and nurturing personal and shared vision, and applying these skills in a practical business settings.

With the publication of Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990 and the increasing interest in organizational learning, the Center's consortium grew rapidly. By 1995, it included nineteen corporate partners.³ These companies undertook a

² It is important to acknowledge that this is a story told largely from the perspective of someone inside the organization, with all of its inherent biases. However, mine is not the only perspective reflected here. I am particularly grateful for the contributions of Linda Pierce and Tom Ryan from the Shell Oil Company, who participated in Shell's transformational process as well as MIT's. Also, to B.C. Huselton and Vicki Tweiten who served on the "mess team" with me as a part of the process, and to Steve Buckley and Jane Punchard, both members of the SoL management team, who generously shared their "before" and "after" perspective.

variety of significant organizational experiments, including: building learning capabilities in intact teams, developing new organizational learning infrastructures, transforming the assumptions and practice of executive leadership and developing internal learning communities. For example, in 1992, Ford's Electrical and Fuel Handling Division (EFHD), a 7000-person profit center, was losing money and was in danger of being sold off. By 1996, it had more than doubled its revenue and was meeting its profit objectives. According to vice president Bob Womac, "We found that taking dialogue, systems thinking and personal vision from the management team to the front line workers transformed the way the organization worked" (Senge, 1997, p 3).

Similarly, at Harley Davidson, a group focused on transforming their new product development process had significant impact. According to Rich Teerlink, who was CEO at the time, "the company was saved from the brink of bankruptcy in the mid-1980s by the heroic effort of more than two thousand people, but it also created a legacy of reactive crisis management that threatened the future. Our organizational learning work has established a new language of basic concepts and is gradually building a base of new skills leading to a second 'turn around'—from crisis managers to continual learners" (Senge, 1997 p 3).

By the mid-1990s, companies such as Ford and Harley had been involved in learning initiatives long enough to assess the business results and document longer-term effects. Articles were being published about the work of the Center, with the result that the Center was gaining increasing attention. *The Fifth Discipline* was still selling over 100,000 copies a year, and it, along with *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, published in 1994, was generating and renewing interest in the field all over the world.

Not unlike many other organizations, the MIT Center for Organizational Learning was ill-prepared for its success. We were under increasing pressure to respond to demands from sponsor companies as well as individuals around the world who were interested in becoming involved in the work. At the same time, there was, in effect, a hiring freeze at MIT that constrained our capacity. The stage was set for what we were to describe later as simply "the mess."

WHY THE REDESIGN WAS UNDERTAKEN

By early 1995, having experimented unsuccessfully with several different leadership structures and low-impact attempts to reorganize the administrative configuration of

³ The nineteen corporate partners included: Amoco, AT&T, Chrysler, EDS, Federal Express, Ford, Harley Davidson, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Intel, Lucent Technologies, Merck & Company, National Semiconductor, Pacific Bell, Philips Display, the Quality Management Network (a consortium of healthcare organizations), Shell Oil Company, Texas Instruments, and US West.

the Center, it seemed clear that the organizational structure was both inadequate and ill-suited to supporting the theories and methods it was espousing.

In addition, the goals and activities of what was becoming an ever-expanding, diverse learning community no longer seemed to fit neatly within the expectations and constraints of an MIT-sponsored research center. Although the “official” structure of the Learning Center was essentially the same as other sponsored research centers at MIT, the Learning Center had, in operation, become a network of individuals: representatives from nineteen companies, research and administrative staff, several MIT faculty, a few doctoral students, and a handful of independent consultants involved in research projects and educational offerings. We had, in fact, outgrown the bounds of a traditional MIT research center.

There was also a sense that the gap between what we were espousing at the Center and what we were actually practicing was widening. Morale was on a downward spiral. This complex set of circumstances led us to the conclusion that the Center was not sustainable, at least in its current organizational form, and that if we didn’t make some fundamental changes it would probably cease to exist.

As a result, the major stakeholders of the Center, including representatives from the research and administrative staff, several faculty from MIT, senior managers from companies that had been central to the Center’s development, and several consultants who had been involved in project initiatives, decided to embark on an extended process of reflection and inquiry into the Center’s purpose, design, structure, and operation.

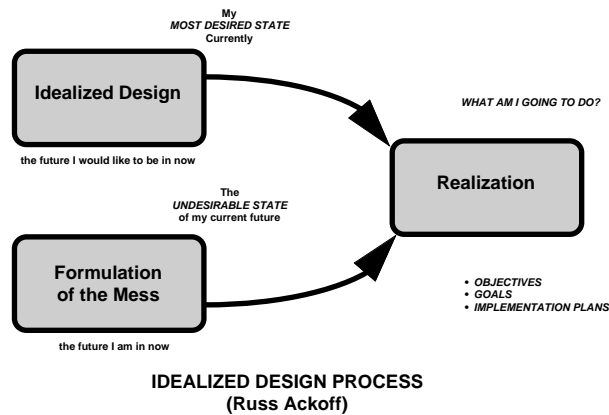
THE PROCESS: GUIDING CONCEPTUAL MODELS

Idealized Design

At our first two-day redesign meeting, held in June of 1995, we gathered together representatives from all of the major stakeholders of the Learning Center—a significant accomplishment in itself—and gained a commitment to move forward. We also agreed that it would be helpful to have a conceptual model that would help focus, clarify, and guide our efforts.

The first phase of our redesign was influenced by the work of Russell Ackoff, a noted researcher and consultant in the area of systems theory and application. Vic Leo, a long-time Center representative from Ford’s Executive Development Center, suggested we use Ackoff’s Idealized Design Process as a way to frame our thinking and focus our efforts. Ackoff’s model involves creating an “idealized design” concurrently with a formulation of the “mess,” or current situation (Figure 1).

Figure 1



This was consistent with the Learning Center’s work in the area of shared vision and the principle of creative tension, which involves determining what you care most deeply about creating and at the same time looking truthfully at the reality of where you currently are. The gap between the two generates tension and the energy for moving toward the new reality.

One of the decisions made at the end of the first redesign meeting was to have a small group of volunteers begin to synthesize and summarize the thinking regarding the Center’s current reality. Based on Ackoff’s terminology, a “mess” team was mobilized, consisting of both research and administrative staff, a former company CEO, and two company representatives. They focused their work on four basic questions:

1. What exactly was the mess?
2. How did it develop?
3. What were the underlying causes and how were they interrelated?
4. What would happen if no significant changes were made to the system?

In September, the mess team reported back to the larger design team on their progress. They had grouped the current problems at the Center into thirteen areas, containing both quantitative and qualitative aspects. These included issues of unmet demands, bureaucratic constraints, unclear boundaries, operational and financial concerns, a confused sense of identity, no widely held shared sense of purpose, and a lack of alignment around the values held at the Center. One aspect of the discrepancy between the espoused and practiced values at the Center was reflected in how the Center operated and the centralization of power and decision making. Even as we were teaching learning disciplines that inherently involve distributing power among participants in organizations, we were part of a very stratified organizational culture that rewarded individual achievement. In addition, the director of the organization was not only its hierarchical head, but also the person who literally wrote the book on the subject matter. Because of his central role in both the theoretical underpinnings of

the field and operational aspects of the Center, he was the only person who had direct interface with all the constituency groups and was involved in all major decisions. This situation was dysfunctional for him as well as the Center.

Based on a systems analysis of the situation, the team developed three recommendations for dealing with the “mess” at the Center:

1. Develop a clear, consistent, common sense of purpose and identity to guide us.
2. Align our espoused and practiced values.
3. Create infrastructures that support and reflect our operating principles.

A number of us had a sense that in order to address these issues, and create a Center that would actually facilitate learning (rather than control), we needed a new way of organizing, some new form or model. Yet we were aware of few options, and most of us had no experience working in anything other than traditional, hierarchical organizations. To help in this process, we were privileged to have as our guide Dee Hock, founder and CEO Emeritus of VISA International.

Chaordic Design

In retrospect, it isn't surprising that Dee has had such a profound effect on our thinking and process at the Learning Center. At the time, however, it seemed more like a lucky accident. Peter Senge had recently met Dee at a leadership conference and was intrigued by his thinking on new ways of organizing, based on chaordic principles.⁴ Dee brought to the design process his experience as co-creator and CEO Emeritus of VISA International. VISA is a highly decentralized, collaborative organization that was developed through the same consensus-building process he was suggesting for us. Over the span of two decades, VISA grew from a few hundred members to the largest enterprise in the world in terms of market capitalization. It is a structured blend of competition and cooperation, linking together 20,000 financial institutions, 14 million merchants, and 600 million consumers in 220 countries and territories producing \$1.25 trillion in volume annually.

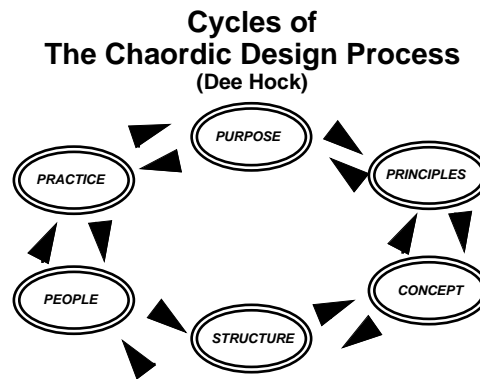
Given our struggle with how to clarify the Center's identity, align our values and practices, and structure our organization in a way that could promote the globalization of the community, Dee's focus and process seemed intuitively to fit. Also, Dee's ideas for implementing and disseminating new concepts of organization that more equitably distribute power and wealth, release human ingenuity, and are more compatible with

⁴ Chaordic [kay' ordic] (1) anything simultaneously chaotic and orderly, (2) patterned in a way dominated neither by chaos nor order, (3) existing in the phase between chaos and order. (Half Moon Bay, CA: The Chaordic Alliance, 1998).

the biosphere, were in themselves very compelling. After a small subset of the design team met with Dee to discuss his ideas, the design team asked him to join us at the next redesign meeting.⁵

At that meeting, Dee shared with us what he called the cycles of a Chaordic Design Process (Figure 2).

Figure 2



He described the six stages as follows:

1. Define with absolute clarity, common understanding, and deep conviction, the purpose of the community.
2. Define, with the same clarity, a body of principles against which all structure, decisions, and conduct will be judged; the fundamental constraints that will guide people in their pursuit of purpose.
3. Create a concept of organization that is in accordance with the principles, and is just, equitable, and effective with respect to all discussion, decisions and acts in pursuit of the community's purpose.
4. Operationalize the purpose, principles, and concept of organization (steps 1-3) by developing a new charter, constitution or bylaws in which all three aspects are embedded as a fundamental obligation of governance.
5. Identify and draw together the people and institutions necessary to achieve the community's purpose in accordance with its principle. (This was subsequently moved to step three in the process.)
6. Identify and engage in the initial practices required to realize the purpose.

Beginning in September of 1995, we began the formal redesign of the Learning Center, following Dee's six step process as described above. At the outset, Dee made two predictions. The first was that it would take us between one and two years to complete

⁵ Dee and the design group also had excellent help from Prof. Larry Yee of the University of California Extension Program for Ventura County, who was on sabbatical and was working with Dee on several projects, including ours.

the process. The second was that it would entail some of the most difficult and yet gratifying work we would ever undertake.

True to his prediction, one year and ten months later we completed the redesign and formally established the Society for Organizational Learning (SoL), a non-profit, self-governing membership organization. Part of the reason it took that amount of time was the fact that members of the design team were from all over the country and it was impossible to convene for face-to-face meetings more than every three or four months. In addition, much of the work and conversation that began in the design team meetings extended beyond the meetings to the larger community and circled back to the design team. The process functioned via concentric circles with the design team at the core, having the responsibility for making decisions and articulating the results of the meetings, as well as getting feedback and input from each of the constituency groups. All of what was going on was communicated and made available to the larger community, both in writing and electronically. This aspect of the process was in itself formidable but essential in making sure the redesign work was informed by the perspectives of as many stakeholders as possible.

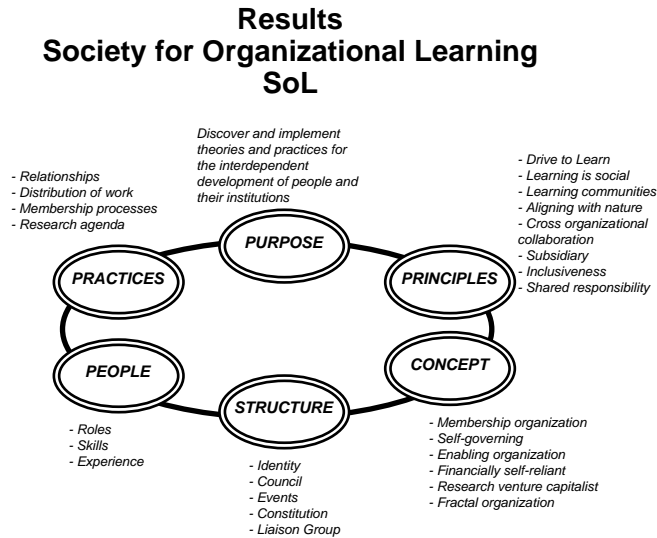
However, another reason it took so long was that, as Dee had forewarned, it was simply very hard work. His process forced us to focus on fundamental questions of purpose and values, challenging us to go beyond our current thinking and reconceive the very notion of organization. Coming to consensus around the most fundamental issues of purpose (why the Center exists) and principles (how we intended to work together to accomplish our purpose) required long hours of deeply reflective conversation. It was very much an emergent process, one in which we shared our deepest hopes and assumptions as well as our most troubling doubts and concerns.

We also wrestled with some very difficult, and at times personal, dilemmas. For example, when it became clear that what we were attempting to establish involved integrating the work of three communities—research, consultant, and corporate—it also became apparent that the organization itself then did not fit into any one of them. The implication was that the new organization should not be an administrative part of MIT and those of us who were MIT employees would need to leave MIT if we wanted to be a part of the new organization. For a number of us, these were difficult and emotional decisions.

At the same time, due to the generative nature of the process, there was already a belief in the purpose and the integrity of what was emerging even before SoL was officially launched. Dee was absolutely right—it was at once very difficult and at the same time exciting and gratifying.

RESULTS

The results from the nearly two-year process included a clearly articulated purpose, a set of beliefs and principles to guide our work, and structural changes as SoL was established as a new organizational entity in a new location (see Figure 3).



In addition to the structural changes brought about by the creation of SoL, the redesign process also resulted in a number of less tangible—but no less important—changes. There was a new sense of excitement and energy as a result of not only an organizational renewal but a kind of organizational rebirth. There was also a sense of accomplishment in having emerged with a broader, deeper, more inclusive mission and clarity about our fundamental purpose.

There was also a heightened sense of responsibility. This was *our* organization, there was no longer “anyone behind the curtain.” On a pragmatic level we could and did accomplish things more quickly—developing a communication strategy, gaining new members, and starting new projects. There is now a perception among staff and members that there is a clearer alignment between our values and our actions. Not only are we espousing learning and change, but we are also practicing it ourselves.

We also succeeded in preserving some core elements of the Learning Center that we felt were important and needed to continue, including: our fundamental beliefs regarding the primacy of learning, our focus on research and knowledge generation, the effort to develop new learning capacities, and the relationship with MIT (MIT is an Institutional Research Member of SoL).

Purpose and Principles

The purpose of the Society for Organizational Learning (SoL) is “to discover, integrate and implement theories and practices for the interdependent development of people and their institutions.” It is a global learning community dedicated to building knowledge about fundamental change by integrating

1. Research (disciplined pursuit of discovery and understanding),
 2. Capacity Building (developing new individual and collective capabilities),
- and

Figure 4

The members of SoL believe that:

- *Drive to Learn* - All human being are born with innate, lifelong desire and ability to learn, which should be enhanced by all organizations.
- *Learning is Social* - People learn best from and with one another, and participation in learning communities is vital to their effectiveness, well being and happiness.
- *Learning Communities* - The capacity and accomplishment of organizations are inseparable from, and dependent on the capacities of the learning community which they foster.
- *Aligning with Nature* - It is essential that organizations evolve to be in greater harmony with human nature and with the natural world.
- *Core Learning Capabilities* - Organizations must develop individual and collective capabilities to understand complex, interdependent issues.
- *Cross-Organizational Collaboration* - Learning communities that connect multiple organizations can significantly enhance the capacity for profound individual and organizational change.

Therefore, SoL and its members intend and will use their best effort to practice:

- *Subsidiarity* - Make no decision and perform no function at a higher level than can be accomplished at more a local level.
- *Inclusiveness* - Conduct all deliberations and make all decisions by bodies and methods which reasonably represent all relevant and affected parties.
- *Shared Responsibility* - Advance the Purpose in accordance with these principles in ways that enhance the capacity of the community as a whole, as well as that of each member.
- *Openness* - Transcend institutional and intellectual boundaries and roles that limit or diminish learning.
- *Adaptive Governance* - Continually conceive, implement and practice governance concepts and processes which encourage adaptability, diversity, flexibility and innovation.
- *Intellectual Output* - Use research generated by the community in ways that most benefit society.
- *Acknowledgment* - Open and fairly acknowledge intellectual contribution to concepts, theories, and practices, both from within and from outside the community.
- *Participation and Quality* - Contribute to and/or participate in research, capacity building and practice, striving for the highest standards of quality.

Taken from the Constitution for the Society for Organizational Learning, 1997.

3. Practice (the application of concepts and tools in pursuit of specific ends).It is designed around a core set of beliefs and principles that organize and guide our work (Figure 4).

Following the inception of SoL in April 1997 as an new organizational entity, we proceeded to transition from an MIT-sponsored research center to an independent, non-profit, membership organization. This included securing formal recognition as a non-profit organization, getting 501(C)3 tax status, securing new office space, and moving the base of operations from MIT to a new location just north of the MIT campus.

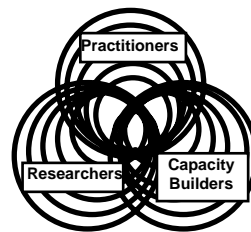
The SoL Structure

SoL is designed as a membership organization that includes corporate members, research members, and consultant members all linked together as a network of colleagues. The intent is to bring these three communities together in an effort to invigorate and integrate the knowledge-creating process in the area of fundamental

institutional change (Figure 5). A constitution and set of bylaws articulates SoL's purpose, principles, and how it operates. It defines the membership categories, governing bodies, responsibilities of the Governing Council, responsibilities of membership, and the process by which Council members are elected.

Figure 5

**Society for Organizational Learning
SoL**



John Shibley, 1996

The SoL governing council is elected by all of the members, with balanced representation from all three membership groups. There is also a managing director, who is a member of, and accountable to, the Council. In addition to the Council, there is also a group of Liaison Officers which include two or three designates from each corporate member. They meet quarterly to ensure alignment between the companies' needs and the overall direction and activities of the SoL community.

The Annual Meeting is the primary event for conducting the business of the SoL community and eliciting Council Members. However, both large and small events are also held to enable members to share research and project work, and to network as a community. Members of the SoL community have the opportunity to participate in community-building activities which are aimed primarily at developing and integrating the three membership groups and facilitating cross-community learning. Members also have the opportunity to participate in an expanding array of capacity-building activities aimed at developing new individual and collective skills. They also participate in learning initiatives designed to generate new knowledge in the area of fundamental organizational change.

SoL is designed to be financially self-reliant, taking in funds through membership fees, meetings, educational offerings, services, products, and research contributions. It also allocates funds for the development of innovative research ideas in line with the overall research agenda of the SoL community. The operational staff of SoL provides a range of community-building, capacity building, communication, and coordination services aimed at integrating the diverse members of the community.

Finally, SoL is designed as a "fractal organization"—a network of independent chapters, operating in various locations, that are committed to SoL's purpose and

principles. The intent is to develop a global network of SoL chapters at the local, national, and international level, all connected through a global infrastructure.

LESSONS LEARNED

New Ways of Conceiving Organization

It is ironic that in this age of ever-accelerating technological innovation and continuing economic globalization, we still operate our organizations using 400-year-old, Newtonian-based models. This machine metaphor not only dominates how we think about organizations, but it also limits how we think about changing them. We need look no further than our corporate language for evidence: we “re-engineer,” “drive,” “re-tool,” “roll-out,” and “restructure” in order to change. We accept it as a given that our organizations are designed and structured for control rather than for learning, even though we may intuitively sense that learning is essential for organizational success, perhaps even survival. It should not be surprising that applying 17th-century thinking to our 20th-century reality does not get us where we want to be.

We are desperate for new metaphors, models, and ways of conceptualizing organizations, yet very few exist. At SoL, we found that a key to our success in generating transformational results was that the chaordic design process forced us to examine our most fundamental assumptions and beliefs about organizations. We learned that changing organizations in fundamental ways first requires changing how we think about them.

However, this new approach was not easy to embrace, or to implement. Dee Hock’s concept of chaordic organizations was a conceptual leap for most of us involved in the design process. I still remember how my head ached when I first saw Dee’s chaordic organizational diagrams—they looked like pictures of atoms from some physics textbook. Even after two years, we are still eliminating or reinventing structures that act to centralize power and activities at SoL. Hierarchies are the water we swim in, and it takes time to become aware of, let alone let go of, our deeply ingrained patterns of thinking.

What differentiated Dee’s process from others I had experienced was that it started with reflection and conversation focused on our deepest aspirations. The simple and yet profound elegance of this approach was that it rested full responsibility from the outset right where it belonged—on us as individuals and as a group—for creating what we wanted. We collectively considered what we care most about creating, and how we wanted to work together to accomplish it. Then we discussed what kind of design and structure would most help us realize our aspirations.

It took about 6 months, perhaps 7 or 8 days of face-to-face conversation, to get to the point where we felt that our purpose and operating principles were clear and meaningful. We refined these further as we progressed through the remaining cycles of the process. It was very different from what seems the norm in companies today, where senior managers develop a mission statement and then “roll it out” to the rest of the organization. Rather than a task to be accomplished or a mandate handed down from above, this was a process of discovering and generating a new organizational reality from within ourselves.

Required Capabilities

On reflection, several key skills and capabilities were, I believe, a prerequisite for the success of the process. The first was that the group was relatively mature and had a capacity for both personal and shared reflection. There was a willingness on the part of each participant to reflect on and share his or her perspectives, thoughts, and feelings. People were genuine and listened to one another.

Another key factor was a tolerance for ambiguity on the part of the group. We did not know what the outcome of the process was going to be, or if there was even going to *be* a workable outcome. Even a year into the process, a number of us were unsure if we would still have jobs, or if so, where they would be. This was emotionally difficult, but it did increase our capacity for patience. We discovered that ambiguous—even messy—situations aren’t necessarily bad.

However, virtually everyone on the design team “hit the wall” at one time or another. Dee himself threatened to throw in the towel on several occasions. We all needed support at times. Coaching—the capacity to give and receive support—was essential to the success of the process. Numerous conversations took place both during and outside the meetings, that helped each of us deal with whatever was causing our frustration and discouragement.

The design team’s familiarity with the basic concepts of shared vision and systems thinking was also very helpful. The use of systems diagrams by the mess team, for example, helped identify and clarify why we were experiencing certain problems, and how they were interrelated. Plus, the ability to view the process holistically enabled us to think broadly and imaginatively about what we wanted to create.

Key Elements of the Design Process

In addition to the capabilities mentioned above, there were also a number of characteristics of the process itself that enabled it to succeed. First, the decision to involve representatives from all the primary constituency groups on the design team was critical, both for attaining a desired outcome and for insuring the integrity of the

process. In order for the group to have clear decision making authority for changing the organization, it needed to reflect the diversity of the community it was representing.

Another essential characteristic of the process was that it was grounded in the pragmatic business realities of the organization. We were all fundamentally committed to creating an organization that worked well and could succeed financially. Although there was some resistance when we got into the complexities of crafting a constitution with specific bylaws, articulating how the organization works with precision and thoroughness has, in retrospect, served us well.

Finally, there was a commitment to retaining elements of the organization that were most valued. Perhaps an often overlooked function of a transformational process is that it provides an opportunity to consider what aspects of the organization are important, and how to ensure that they will endure.

What was not readily apparent to many of us at the onset of the design process was the generic nature of the issues that we faced as an organization. The fundamental concerns that the mess team surfaced—such as the lack of a clear, consistent shared vision, and the disconnect between our espoused versus practiced values—were all problems we hear over and over from member companies. We discovered that many issues which appear unique to a particular organizational context are, at a fundamental level, remarkably similar.

Future Challenges to SoL

It is still early to speculate on the long-term sustainability of SoL, since the organization is just two years old as of this writing. However, we are far enough along to begin to understand some of the challenges we face as a community.

There are now a number of SoL fractals (chapters) that have been, or are about to be, established in Europe, South America, and Asia. In the United States, a Midwest SoL has been established, with others soon to follow in Texas and Georgia. A new SoL International infrastructure is about to be incorporated. With this expansion comes the obvious need to extend our infrastructure and processes for sharing what we are learning and for developing learning capabilities among our worldwide members.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for the SoL community is not to lose sight of the fundamental questions we started with: How do we as a community realize our deepest aspirations for change? How can we continually adapt SoL as an organization so it serves us rather than the other way around? Reinventing from the inside out is truly an ongoing and worthy challenge.

Dee Hock eloquently sums up the struggle, and opportunity, that we face: “We are at that very point in time when a 400 year old age is dying and another is struggling to be born—a shifting of culture, science, society, and institutions enormously greater than the world has ever experienced. Ahead [lies] the possibility of the regeneration of individuality, liberty, community, and ethics such as the world has never known, and a harmony with nature, with one another, and with divine intelligence such as the world has never dreamed.”

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