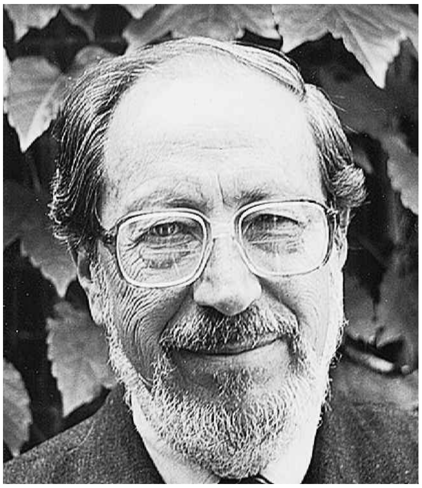
From the Founding Editor

EDITORIAL



One of the most powerful elements of culture is how the self is defined. Every culture develops powerful concepts that parents teach their children about what should and should not be one's self. These concepts become so ingrained and taken for granted that we are not aware of them unless they are challenged, as when someone treats us in a way that is insulting or embarrassing. What those incidents tell us is that the value that we have placed on ourselves is not reciprocated. Or what we think of ourselves has somehow been violated in the conversation. Threats to self-esteem are intrinsically painful because we want to maintain our illusions about ourselves.

We have all been very well trained in how to be polite in conversations so as not to threaten anyone. We laugh at even the poorest jokes. We collectively ignore incidents such as someone's flatulence in a social gathering. Self-exposure is tricky yet necessary. When we talk of sincerity, integrity, congruence, and knowing where someone stands, we are in each case referring to various aspects of presentation of the self.

In this issue, we explore various facets of self-presentation and its consequences, leading off with the classic analysis of ''face-work'' by the late Erving Goffman. Not all the articles have the dynamics of self as their central theme, but all are relevant.

Stories, for instance, are powerful carriers of culture. In a story, the self can be made visible. We can identify with the characters and see ourselves through their eyes. When we get too abstract and conceptual, the self is still there but concealed, which makes it harder for our audiences to understand where we are coming from.

Ed Schein

EDITORIAL

In This Issue

Edgar H. Schein and Karen Ayas

The dynamics of self in an organized system, elements of social interaction, and the ritual roles of the self as a member of a particular community are some of the many facets of culture explored in this issue, starting with the classic by the late **Erving Goffman**. Read and reread Goffman's thorough analysis of human behavior in social encounters for conceptual insight.

The essays and stories that follow bring out different aspects of the presentation of the self and culture. **Fredrick Simon** (with Ketsara Rugchart) shares his experience introducing organizational learning tools and methods to a Thai company and the painful lessons he learned when he ignored cultural cues of self-presentation in Thailand. **Robert Hanig,** a consultant and colleague, comments on the challenges of creating a culturally acceptable way of exploring different perspectives without the threat of ''losing face.''

Next, **Bill McQuillen,** a learning consultant at Shell and champion of change, reveals his operating model and principles with respect to self. By bringing his whole self into every situation, without fear of losing face, he encourages others in the system to do the same. Do not miss the concise commentary by **Linda Pierce,** who has worked with McQuillen for many years. She encourages us to articulate our own model to guide our choices and behaviors and to pay attention to ''how others experience us.''

Michael Jones, a composer and pianist, brilliantly analyzes the tension we all face when we need to decide how much of ourselves to expose in a situation. **Lara Nuer** and **Shayne Hughes** comment on how Jones speaks to the essence of barriers in the corporate world and address the practical challenges of enhancing our skills to ''feel the moment,'' be present, and give in to emergence in the workplace.

Some tools to illuminate this path are offered in the next articles on stories and storytelling. **Annette Simmons** underscores the benefits of bringing stories, poetry, and metaphor into the business world, the legitimacy of the ''subjective,'' and the dangers of solely relying on an analytical approach. In the commentaries that follow, **Judy Sorum Brown** explains how, in her own practice, stories have created a path to deeper understanding and a playing field for exploration and self-disclosure. **Ipek Kursat** points to the necessity of stories in learning from tradition and of objective tools in moving to action.

Scott Thompson shares a poem and reflections on a visit to the Butchart Gardens in Vancouver, an abandoned limestone quarry that Jennie Butchart transformed into a spectacular garden.

Next, **Robert Dickman** outlines the four elements of every successful story. **Beth Jandernoa,** in her comments, tells an episode of her own story using Dickman's framework. **Michael Sales** and **Marshall Goldsmith** each expand on how and why we should take the opportunity to tell a great story.

We close the issue with **Vic Leo**'s story as told by **George Roth**. Now looking back on his years at Ford from a completely different perspective, the former executive at the forefront of numerous organizational change efforts calls us to reflect: To what extent are we ready if a culture change involves major changes of self?

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On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction

Erving Goffman

Erving Goffman
Formerly Benjamin Franklin Professor of Anthropology and Sociology
University of Pennsylvania

Every person lives in a world of social encounters, involving him either in face-to-face or mediated contact with other participants. In each of these contacts, he tends to act out what is sometimes called a *line*—that is, a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself. Regardless of whether a person intends to take a line, he will find that he has done so in effect. The other participants will assume that he has more or less willfully taken a stand, so that if he is to deal with their response to him he must take into consideration the impression they have possibly formed of him.

The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes—albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself. . . .

In our Anglo-American society, as in some others, the phrase "to lose face" seems to mean to be in wrong face, to be out of face, or to be shamefaced. The phrase "to save one's face" appears to refer to the process by which the person sustains an impression for others that he has not lost face. Following Chinese usage, one can say that "to give face" is to arrange for another to take a better line than he might otherwise have been able to take, the other thereby gets face given him, this being one way in which he can gain face.

As an aspect of the social code of any social circle, one may expect to find an understanding as to how far a person should go to save his face. Once he takes on a self-image expressed through face he will be expected to live up to it. In different ways in different societies he will be required to show self-respect, abjuring certain actions because they are above or beneath him, while forcing himself to perform others even though they cost him dearly. . . .

The combined effect of the rule of self-respect and the rule of considerateness is that the person tends to conduct himself during an encounter so as to maintain both his own face and the face of the other participants. This means that the line taken by each participant is usually allowed to prevail, and each participant is allowed to carry off the role he appears to have chosen for himself. A state where everyone temporarily accepts everyone else's line is established. This kind of mutual acceptance seems to be a basic structural feature of interaction, especially the interaction of face-to-face talk. It is typically a "working" acceptance, not a "real" one, since it tends to be based not on agreement of candidly expressed heart-felt evaluations, but upon a willingness to give temporary lip service to judgments with which the participants do not really agree.

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The mutual acceptance of lines has an important conservative effect upon encounters. Once the person initially presents a line, he and the others tend to build their later responses upon it, and in a sense become stuck with it. Should the person radically alter his line, or should it become discredited, then confusion results, for the participants will have prepared and committed themselves for actions that are now unsuitable.

Ordinarily, maintenance of face is a condition of interaction, not its objective. Usual objectives, such as gaining face for oneself, giving free expression to one's true beliefs, introducing depreciating information about the others, or solving problems and performing tasks, are typically pursued in such a way as to be consistent with the maintenance of face. To study face-saving is to study the traffic rules of social interaction; one learns about the code the person adheres to in his movement across the paths and designs of others, but not where he is going, or why he wants to get there. One does not even learn why he is ready to follow the code, for a large number of different motives can equally lead him to do so. He may want to save his own face because of his emotional attachment to the image of self which it expresses, because of his pride or honor, because of the power his presumed status allows him to exert over the other participants, and so on. He may want to save the others' face because of his emotional attachment to an image of them, or because he feels that his coparticipants have a moral right to this protection, or because he wants to avoid the hostility that may be directed toward him if they lose their face. He may feel that an assumption has been made that he is the sort of person who shows compassion and sympathy toward others, so that to retain his own face, he may feel obliged to be considerate of the line taken by the other participants.

By *face-work* I mean to designate the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face. Face-work serves to counteract "incidents"—that is, events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face. Thus poise is one important type of face-work, for through poise the person controls his embarrassment and hence the embarrassment that he and others might have over his embarrassment. Whether or not the full consequences of face-saving actions are known to the person who employs them, they often become habitual and standardized practices; they are like traditional plays in a game or traditional steps in a dance. Each person, subculture, and society seems to have its own characteristic repertoire of face-saving practices. It is to this repertoire that people partly refer when they ask what a person or culture is "really" like. And yet the particular set of practices stressed by particular persons or groups seems to be drawn from a single logically coherent framework of possible practices. It is as if face, by its very nature, can be saved only in a certain number of ways, and as if each social grouping must make its selections from this single matrix of possibilities.

Each person, subculture, and society seems to have its own characteristic repertoire of face-saving practices.

The members of every social circle may be expected to have some knowledge of face-work and some experience in its use. In our society, this kind of capacity is sometimes called tact, *savoir-faire,* diplomacy, or social skill. Variation in social skill pertains more to the efficacy of face-work than to the frequency of its application, for almost all acts involving others are modified, prescriptively or proscriptively, by considerations of face.

If a person is to employ his repertoire of face-saving practices, obviously he must first become aware of the interpretations that others may have placed upon his acts and the interpretations that he ought perhaps to place upon theirs. In other words, he must exercise perceptiveness. But even if he is properly alive to symbolically conveyed judgments and is socially skilled, he must yet be willing to exercise his perceptiveness and his skill; he must, in short, be prideful and considerate. Admittedly, of course, the possession of perceptiveness and social skill so often leads to their application that in our society terms such as politeness or tact fail to distinguish between the inclination to exercise such capacities and the capacities themselves.

I have already said that the person will have two points of view—a defensive orientation toward saving his own face and a protective orientation toward saving the others' face. Some practices will be primarily defensive and others primarily protective, although in general one may expect these two perspectives to be taken at the same time. In trying to save the face of others, the person must choose a tack that will not lead to loss of his own; in trying to save his own face, he must consider the loss of face that his action may entail for others.

In many societies there is a tendency to distinguish three levels of responsibility that a person may have for a threat to face that his actions have created. First, he may appear to have acted innocently; his offense seems to be unintended and unwitting, and those who perceive his act can feel that he would have attempted to avoid it had he foreseen its offensive consequences. In our society one calls such threats to face *faux pas, gaffes,* boners, or bricks. Secondly, the offending person may appear to have acted maliciously and spitefully, with the intention of causing open insult. Thirdly, there are incidental offenses; these arise as an unplanned but sometimes anticipated by-product of action—action the offender performs in spite of its offensive consequences, although not out of spite. From the point of view of a particular participant, these three types of threat can be introduced by the participant himself against his own face, by himself against the face of the others, by the others against their own face, or by the others against himself. Thus the person may find himself in many different relations to a threat to face. If he is to handle himself and others well in all contingencies, he will have to have a repertoire of face-saving practices for each of these possible relations to threat. . . .

Cooperation in Face-Work

When a face has been threatened, face-work must be done, but whether this is initiated and primarily carried through by the person whose face is threatened, or by the offender, or by a mere witness, is often of secondary importance. Lack of effort on the part of one person induces compensative effort from others; a contribution by one person relieves the others of the task. In fact, there are many minor incidents in which the offender and the offended simultaneously attempt to initiate an apology. Resolution of the situation to everyone's apparent satisfaction is the first requirement; correct apportionment of blame is typically a secondary consideration. Hence terms such as tact and *savoir-faire* fail to distinguish whether it is the person's own face that his diplomacy saves or the face of the others. Similarly, terms such as *gaffe* and *faux pas* fail to specify whether it is the actor's own face he has threatened or the face of other participants. And it is understandable that if one person finds he is powerless to save his own face, the others seem especially bound to protect him. For example, in polite society, a handshake that perhaps should not have been extended becomes one that cannot be declined. Thus one accounts for the *noblesse oblige* through which those of high status are expected to curb their power of embarrassing their lessers, as well as the fact that the handicapped often accept courtesies that they can manage better without.

If one person finds he is powerless to save his own face, the others seem especially bound to protect him.

Since each participant in an undertaking is concerned, albeit for differing reasons, with saving his own face and the face of the others, then tacit cooperation will naturally arise so that the participants together can attain their shared but differently motivated objectives.

One common type of tacit cooperation in face-saving is the tact exerted in regard to face-work itself. The person not only defends his own face and protects the face of the others, but also acts so as to make it possible and even easy for the others to employ face-work for themselves and him. He helps them to help themselves and him. Social etiquette, for example, warns men against asking for New Year's Eve dates too early in the season, lest the girl find it difficult to provide a gentle excuse for refusing. This second-order tact can be further illustrated by the widespread practice of negative-attribute etiquette. The person who has an unapparent negatively valued attribute often finds it expedient to begin an encounter with an unobtrusive admission of his failing, especially with persons who are uninformed about him. The others are thus warned in advance against making disparaging remarks about his kind of person and are saved from the contradiction of acting in a friendly fashion to a person toward whom they are unwittingly being hostile. This strategy also prevents the others from automatically making assumptions about him which place him in a false position and saves him from painful forbearance or embarrassing remonstrances.

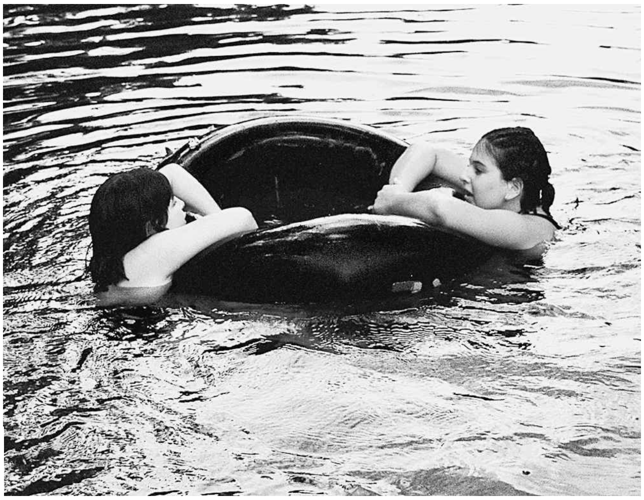
Tact in regard to face-work often relies for its operation on a tacit agreement to do business through the language of hint—the language of innuendo, ambiguities, well-placed pauses, carefully worded jokes, and so on. The rule regarding this unofficial kind of communication is that the sender ought not to act as if he had officially conveyed the message he has hinted at, while the recipients have the right and the obligation to act as if they have not officially received the message contained in the hint. Hinted communication, then, is deniable communication; it need not be faced up to. It provides a means by which the person can be warned that his current line or the current situation is leading to loss of face, without this warning itself becoming an incident.

Another form of tacit cooperation, and one that seems to be much used in many societies, is reciprocal self-denial. Often the person does not have a clear idea of what would be a just or acceptable apportionment of judgments during the occasion, and so he voluntarily deprives or depreciates himself while indulging and complimenting the others, in both cases carrying the judgments safely past what is likely to be just. The favorable judgments about himself he allows to come from the others; the unfavorable judgments of himself are his own contributions. This "after you, Alphonse" technique works, of course, because in depriving himself he can reliably anticipate that the others will compliment or indulge him. Whatever allocation of favors is eventually established, all participants are first given a chance to show that they are not bound or constrained by their own desires and expectations, that they have a properly modest view of themselves, and that they can be counted upon to support the ritual code. Negative bargaining, through which each participant tries to make the terms of trade more favorable to the other side, is another instance; as a form of exchange perhaps it is more widespread than the economist's kind.

A person's performance of face-work, extended by his tacit agreement to help others perform theirs, represents his willingness to abide by the ground rules of social interaction. Here is the hallmark of his socialization as an interactant. If he and the others were not socialized in this way, interaction in most societies and most situations would be a much more hazardous thing for feelings and faces. The person would find it impractical to be oriented to symbolically conveyed appraisals of social worth, or to be possessed of feelings—that is, it would be impractical for him to be a ritually delicate object. And as I shall suggest, if the person were not a ritually delicate object, occasions of talk could not be organized in the way they usually are. It is no wonder that trouble is caused by a person who cannot be relied upon to play the face-saving game.

The Ritual Roles of the Self

So far I have implicitly been using a double definition of self: the self as an image pieced together from the expressive implications of the full flow of events in an undertaking; and the self as a kind of player in a ritual game who copes honorably or dishonorably, diplomatically or undiplomatically, with the judgmental contingencies of the situation. A double mandate is involved. As sacred objects, men are subject to slights and profanation; hence as players of the ritual game they have had to lead themselves into duels, and wait for a round of shots to go wide of the mark before embracing their opponents. Here is an echo of the distinction between the value of a hand drawn at cards and the capacity of the person who plays it. This distinction must be kept in mind, even though it appears that once a person has gotten a reputation for good or bad play this reputation may become part of the face he must later play at maintaining.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Once the two roles of the self have been separated, one can look to the ritual code implicit in face-work to learn how the two roles are related. When a person is responsible for introducing a threat to another's face, he apparently has a right, within limits, to wriggle out of the difficulty by means of self-abasement. When performed voluntarily these indignities do not seem to profane his own image. It is as if he had the right of insulation and could castigate himself qua actor without injuring himself qua object of ultimate worth. By token of the same insulation he can belittle himself and modestly underplay his positive qualities, with the understanding that no one will take his statements as a fair representation of his sacred self. On the other hand, if he is forced against his will to treat himself in these ways, his face, his pride, and his honor will be seriously threatened. Thus, in terms of the ritual code, the person seems to have a special license to accept mistreatment at his own hands that he does not have the right to accept from others. Perhaps this is a safe arrangement because he is not likely to carry this license too far, whereas the others, were they given this privilege, might be more likely to abuse it.

Further, within limits the person has a right to forgive other participants for affronts to his sacred image. He can forbearantly overlook minor slurs upon his face, and in regard to somewhat greater injuries he is the one person who is in a position to accept apologies on behalf of his sacred self. This is a relatively safe prerogative for the person to have in regard to himself, for it is one that is exercised in the interests of the others or of the undertaking. Interestingly enough, when the person commits a *gaffe* against himself, it is not he who has the license to forgive the event; only the others have that prerogative, and it is a safe prerogative for them to have because they can exercise it only in his interests or in the interests of the undertaking. One finds, then, a system of checks and balances by which each participant tends to be given the right to handle only those matters which he will have little motivation for mishandling. In short, the rights and obligations of an interactant are designed to prevent him from abusing his role as an object of sacred value. . . .

Face and Social Relationships

When a person begins a mediated or immediate encounter, he already stands in some kind of social relationship to the others concerned, and expects to stand in a given relationship to them after the particular encounter ends. This, of course, is one of the ways in which social contacts are geared into the wider society. Much of the activity occurring during an encounter can be understood as an effort on everyone's part to get through the occasion and all the unanticipated and unintentional events that can cast participants in an undesirable light, without disrupting the relationships of the participants. And if relationships are in the process of change, the object will be to bring the encounter to a satisfactory close without altering the expected course of development. This perspective nicely accounts, for example, for the little ceremonies of greeting and farewell which occur when people begin a conversational encounter or depart from one. Greetings provide a way of showing that a relationship is still what it was at the termination of the previous coparticipation, and, typically, that this relationship involves sufficient suppression of hostility for the participants temporarily to drop their guards and talk. Farewells sum up the effect of the encounter upon the relationship and show what the participants may expect of one another when they next meet. The enthusiasm of greetings compensates for the weakening of the relationship caused by the absence just terminated, while the enthusiasm of farewells compensates the relationship for the harm that is about to be done to it by separation.

It seems to be a characteristic obligation of many social relationships that each of the members guarantees to support a given face for the other members in given situations. To prevent disruption of these relationships, it is therefore necessary for each member to avoid destroying the others' face. At the same time, it is often the person's social relationship with others that leads him to participate in certain encounters with them, where incidentally he will be dependent upon them for supporting his face. Furthermore, in many relationships, the members come to share a face, so that in the presence of third parties an improper act on the part of one member becomes a source of acute embarrassment to the other members. A social relationship, then, can be seen as a way in which the person is more than ordinarily forced to trust his self-image and face to the tact and good conduct of others.

A social relationship is a way in which the person is forced to trust his self-image and face to the tact and good conduct of others.

The Nature of the Ritual Order

The ritual order seems to be organized basically on accommodative lines, so that the imagery used in thinking about other types of social order is not quite suitable for it. For the other types of social order a kind of schoolboy model seems to be employed: if a person wishes to sustain a particular image of himself and trust his feelings to it, he must work hard for the credits that will buy this self-enhancement for him; should he try to obtain ends by improper means, by cheating or theft, he will be punished, disqualified from the race, or at least made to start all over again from the beginning. This is the imagery of a hard, dull game. In fact, society and the individual join in one that is easier on both of them, yet one that has dangers of its own.

Whatever his position in society, the person insulates himself by blindnesses, half-truths, illusions, and rationalizations. He makes an "adjustment" by convincing himself, with the tactful support of his intimate circle, that he is what he wants to be and that he would not do to gain his ends what the others have done to gain theirs. And as for society, if the person is willing to be subject to informal social control—if he is willing to find out from hints and glances and tactful cues what his place is, and keep it—then there will be no objection to his furnishing this place at his own discretion, with all the comfort, elegance, and nobility that his wit can muster for him. To protect this shelter he does not have to work hard, or join a group, or compete with anybody; he need only be careful about the expressed judgments he places himself in a position to witness. Some situations and acts and persons will have to be avoided; others, less threatening, must not be pressed too far. Social life is an uncluttered, orderly thing because the person voluntarily stays away from the places and topics and times where he is not wanted and where he might be disparaged for going. He cooperates to save his face, finding that there is much to be gained from venturing nothing.

Facts are of the schoolboy's world—they can be altered by diligent effort but they cannot be avoided. But what the person protects and defends and invests his feelings in is an idea about himself, and ideas are vulnerable not to facts and things but to communications. Communications belong to a less punitive scheme than do facts, for communications can be by-passed, withdrawn from, disbelieved, conveniently misunderstood, and tactfully conveyed. And even should the person misbehave and break the truce he has made with society, punishment need not be the consequence. If the offense is one that the offended persons can let go by without losing too much face, then they are likely to act forbearantly, telling themselves that they will get even with the offender in another way at another time, even though such an occasion may never arise and might not be exploited if it did. If the offense is great, the offended persons may withdraw from the encounter, or from future similar ones, allowing their withdrawal to be reinforced by the awe they may feel toward someone who breaks the ritual code. Or they may have the offender withdrawn, so that no further communication can occur. But since the offender can salvage a good deal of face from such operations, withdrawal is often not so much an informal punishment for an offense as it is merely a means of terminating it. Perhaps the main principle of the ritual order is not justice but face, and what any offender receives is not what he deserves but what will sustain for the moment the line to which he has committed himself, and through this the line to which he has committed the interaction.

Throughout this paper it has been implied that underneath their differences in culture, people everywhere are the same. If persons have a universal human nature, they themselves are not to be looked to for an explanation of it. One must look rather to the fact that societies everywhere, if they are to be societies, must mobilize their members as self-regulating participants in social encounters. One way of mobilizing the individual for this purpose is through ritual; he is taught to be perceptive, to have feelings attached to self and a self expressed through face, to have pride, honor, and dignity, to have considerateness, to have tact and a certain amount of poise. These are some of the elements of behavior which must be built into the person if practical use is to be made of him as an interactant, and it is these elements that are referred to in part when one speaks of universal human nature.

Universal human nature is not a very human thing. By acquiring it, the person becomes a kind of construct, built up not from inner psychic propensities but from moral rules that are impressed upon him from without. These rules, when followed, determine the evaluation he will make of himself and of his fellow-participants in the encounter, the distribution of his feelings, and the kinds of practices he will employ to maintain a specified and obligatory kind of ritual equilibrium. The general capacity to be bound by moral rules may well belong to the individual, but the particular set of rules which transforms him into a human being derives from requirements established in the ritual organization of social encounters. And if a particular person or group or society seems to have a unique character all its own, it is because its standard set of human-nature elements is pitched and combined in a particular way. Instead of much pride, there may be little. Instead of abiding by the rules, there may be much effort to break them safely. But if an encounter or undertaking is to be sustained as a viable system of interaction organized on ritual principles, then these variations must be held within certain bounds and nicely counterbalanced by corresponding modifications in some of the other rules and understandings. Similarly, the human nature of a particular set of persons may be specially designed for the special kind of undertakings in which they participate, but still each of these persons must have within him something of the balance of characteristics required of a usable participant in any ritually organized system of social activity.

Lessons from Creating a Learning Organization

Fredrick Simon with Ketsara Rugchart

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This tale of a one-year effort to help a major oil and gas exploration and production company become a learning organization is also a story of working in Thailand and how I addressed—or failed to address—cultural issues in my approach.

The Thai company had begun employing organizational learning (OL) concepts in 1998 when a manager and a senior analyst in the organization and process development department introduced the concepts, based on information they had read. By defining learning organizations as those in which best practices are shared among teams, they addressed the greatest perceived weakness of the company at the time. They had some initial success when two staff teams began to share more effectively, but they wanted to expand the effort and recognized that they needed outside help.

What Is a Learning Organization?

In August 2000, I went to Thailand to give the senior managers an overview of OL and explore with them the possibilities of undertaking a project together. The first day of my two-day visit was devoted to a general awareness session. I defined a learning organization as one that is continually enhancing its ability to get the results it truly wants. We then explored that definition in more detail. I explained that understanding what an organization wants requires dialogue to create a shared vision that has meaning for all employees and connects with their personal visions. It also requires a definition of shared values in how we act as we work toward the vision. Alignment of the vision and commitment to its accomplishment require the ability to have open, honest conversations about what is important—to be able to listen to each other without judging or attributing motives. Taking action toward the vision requires an understanding of the complex systems in which we operate and the sometimes counterintuitive effects of those systems on our behavior. I briefly reviewed the organizational learning tools and methods, as defined in *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 1990), that we could use to accomplish each of these steps in our effort to get better results.

Later, we had a more detailed discussion of their previous definition of a learning organization as one that shares best practices, which some managers defined as a knowledge management (KM) and information technology effort. Organizational learning, while broader in scope in my definition, can facilitate KM in a number of ways.

First, alignment of a common vision reduces competitiveness and the associated not-invented-here factors, allowing for greater demand for the shared knowledge—the information-retrieval side of the equation.

Second, the greatest learning takes place in failure, when things don't go as expected. Yet, in most organizations, success is what is shared, while failure is covered up. In a learning organization, shared vision and the understanding that we need each other to achieve the vision lead to a willingness to be open and to risk vulnerability by sharing learning from failure as well—the more complete, input side of the equation. Organizational learning does not replace KM tools, but can provide a substantial accelerator to the KM effort.

At the start of the second day of my visit, the president asked me to help them understand by providing a more specific example of how being a learning organization might affect their strategic plan. I thought that the best illustration would be to use the vision deployment matrix (VDM) technique I had learned from Daniel Kim (Kim, 1997). The VDM, as I interpret it, is based on two principles: (1) focus on the vision, and (2) act at the level of highest leverage (see table 1). We see and take action most often at the level of events—individual, discrete happenings—or, at best, at the level of patterns—trends of events over time. The VDM helps us to refocus our efforts on higher leverage, systemic structures, or assumptions behind those structures, to improve results.

The greatest learning takes place in failure, when things don't go as expected.

I began by stating the vision of the company as already published:

> The leading petroleum exploration and production company, with operational excellence, international best practices, and world-class competitive strengths.

Together, we began to explore the words in the vision. The managers felt that operational excellence required efficiency and productivity. Efficiency and productivity in production meant either producing more per man-hour or producing the same amount at lower cost. When I asked how much lower the cost would have to be, the managers responded that it would be lower than that of their major competitor in the region. I asked whether they knew what their competitor's cost was, and they told me. We then agreed on how much lower their cost would have to be to achieve this specific outcome and established a ''vision'' for the cost of an equivalent barrel of energy.

Given the specific vision for cost, we explored possible mental models. One of the key mental models the managers identified was that Thais could do the work without foreign (that is, high-cost) experts. We then began to explore systemic structures consistent with that new mental model and identified a new training structure in which the employment contract would require that part of an expatriate worker's time would be spent training Thais to do his job, so that after two years, the expatriate workers would no longer be required. I then asked the president if such a contractual structure was included in the strategic plan, and he said it was not. This, then, is one difference made in the strategic plan because of using OL tools and methods.

After the session, the president and his key executives discussed the approach and said that they wanted to know more. I developed a broad outline for a one-year intervention, with me acting as an outside consultant and with the work largely centered on using the tools and methods of OL to improve senior management interrelationships and the strategic planning process. My primary client would be the president, with support from Ketsara Rugchart and the internal OL consultants. I refused a one-year contract, the usual way of doing business, saying instead that I would be happy to work with no contract and to stop at any time we felt I was not adding significant value.

At this point, I thought we had agreed on goals for the year. I later found that some key management people had not attended the session, and not all of those who had attended understood or agreed with those goals. In addition, some still thought this was a limited KM project.

The Effects of Cultural Differences

When the next session began, it was not what some of the managers had expected. They were confused about the subject matter and were used to polished presentations of neatly packaged answers instead of mutual exploration of tough questions. But, because of the importance of ''face'' in the Thai culture, they ''protected'' me by not raising these issues. Instead, I found that after each of the next three sessions, one of the vice presidents requested a vote on whether we should continue the effort.

After the third vote (22–4 to continue), Ketsara and I met with the president and a key vice president. The president again asked where we were going and what would be the benefits. The vice president then spoke for an extended time in Thai. No one translated

Table 1 Vision deployment matrix

	Desired future	*Current reality*	*Gap*	*Actions to close gap*
Vision				
Mental models				
Systemic structures				
Patterns				
Events				

for me. (I learned later that he said my approach was not that of a polished trainer, that the material was not appropriate for the Thai culture, and that we should stop the project.)

When he finished, it was clear that they were waiting for me to speak and that I would not have a chance to respond to the vice president's comments. I began by reminding the president that I am not a professional trainer but a retired Ford Motor Co. line manager who implemented these OL techniques in my own organization with exceptional results. I went back over what we hoped to gain through OL, what we had accomplished so far, and what was next. I pointed out that to get the desired results would take the group's commitment; I didn't know how they could commit to something when they didn't know from session to session whether we would continue. I suggested that it might be better to suspend the work until they were sure of what they wanted to do, because to continue in this way would be a waste of my time and their money. I offered to help find someone to work with them at a later date if they decided to continue. This was a turning point in the project; after this meeting, no further votes were taken and the project proceeded with commitment from most of the managers.

The openness and honesty assumed as a goal of organizational learning can, in fact, be countercultural.

The openness and honesty assumed as a goal of organizational learning can, in fact, be countercultural. In this Thai organization's mental models, saving face and respecting and following orders from older and higher placed individuals was the norm. It became apparent, however, that some of the best results came from the ability to overcome the cultural inhibition to openness and honest, respectful disagreement, as I discuss later. A shared vision can have a powerful effect in overcoming existing cultural norms.

Creating a Learning Structure

In the early sessions, the managers and I worked on the role of leadership and personal and shared vision and values. We developed shared meanings for the words in the vision, determined outcomes that would indicate success, and quantified the measurements we would use. During this effort, we began to practice conversation tools, systems thinking, the VDM, and dialogue, but tools were introduced only when they helped further the organization's work.

At the same time, we began to form a reflective-partner network one level down from the senior leadership group. We called the participants ''learning leaders.'' I explained to the senior managers the value of reflective partners as trusted members of their staffs who could reflect—hold up a mirror or be the mirror—to them their espoused and actual behavioral differences. The purpose was not to be judgmental, but to help them understand how patterns in their behavior affected others and had an impact on what they wanted to accomplish. I asked for and obtained their agreement to initiate the process and asked each of them to designate a person to play this role.

Our learning structure now included an outside consultant (me); two inside consultants, including Ketsara, as partners in design, diagnosis, feedback, and support; and a core group of learning leaders who would be reflective partners for the senior executives and could help accelerate the spread of OL tools and methods throughout the company. The learning leaders began to learn about the five disciplines (Senge, 1990) and how to be good reflective partners to an individual or a group. Learning was through lecture, conversation, dialogue, exercises, and role playing. We developed a contract for them to use with their senior management partner.

When the reflective partners were to begin working with their designated partners, however, I found that some senior managers had appointed a person they could spare at the moment and that they could not actually work with that person in the reflective-partnering role. I realized I should have spent more time on the requirements for a reflective partner, reviewed the partnering contract with the senior managers, and then allowed some time before asking them to designate someone.

About halfway through the project, with continuing individual and group coaching with Ketsara and monthly group reinforcement from me, the reflective-partnering relationship improved, and there was some progress in senior managers' understanding of each other and of the process to deploy the vision. At this point, we began to look at the strategic planning process.

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An OL Approach to Strategic Planning

The company's approach to strategic planning was similar to that of most organizations. The strategic planning department assessed the company's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and developed a strategic plan. It presented and discussed the plan in detail at a senior management retreat; it was modified as required and approved. The plan was then expanded to add individual department objectives, with appropriate departmental input, and then given to the rest of the organization to implement.

A strategic planning process based on OL principles is very different. The vice president for strategic planning and I believed that it should focus on vision rather than reacting to competition. We also believed that an OL-based strategic plan would build alignment and commitment throughout the organization and allow those closest to the work to help define an action plan to fulfill the strategy.

Starting at the point of highest leverage, as discussed earlier, an OL-based strategic plan would build a shared vision throughout the 35 departments, align department visions with the company vision, permit employees to see how their individual day-to-day work would help achieve the vision, and gain all employees' commitment to action, recognizing the structural leverage points for effective action. We presented a proposal for a new OL-based strategic planning process to the senior management group and got their endorsement.

Implementation of the plan began when senior managers revisited the company vision and questioned whether it contained sufficient emotion, excitement, and inspiration for all employees. In a dialogue, we expanded some of the meanings, at least for internal use. We then clarified the words by specifying measurements to indicate when we would have reached the vision. We had to pay a great deal of attention to the meanings of "world class" and "leader."

Next, we held a strategic planning management retreat in June 2001. We spent the first part of the retreat verifying the vision and its expected outcomes; reviewing the external environment scan in terms of technological advances, potential demand, and competitive activity; and identifying the key strategic questions. We then presented a systems map, describing the interrelationships and systemic links among key environmental criteria and the organization (Senge, 1990). From the systems map, we identified the four highest leverage areas of the map for senior managers' focused effort. Senior managers developed VDMs and action plans for the high-leverage areas. These plans became the cornerstone of the total strategic planning effort. We then developed metrics to assess progress in the four key areas and proposed them for the managers' consideration. The purpose of this effort was to develop some unique, nontraditional measures that could be used internally to keep managers focused on the vision, rather than on traditional historical measures.

The OL-based strategic planning process was then spread throughout the organization. Each of the 35 departments had a ''learning lab.'' The labs, conducted by Ketsara, included a detailed explanation of the company vision, a departmental strategic-vision session, and alignment with the company vision. This was followed by specific planning efforts based on a VDM. Ketsara confirms that this was the first time that everyone, at all levels, was involved in the strategic plan and understood how their individual and departmental work contributed to the company's success. Employees' comments after the sessions indicated that they appreciated the process; many mentioned it favorably in the annual employee feedback questionnaire.

Results of the OL Effort

In January 2002, I visited the company again to check the progress of the previous six months and to aid in the OL plans for 2002 (see, also, the sidebar). I saw some specific results on that visit:

- One manager told about an exploration project in which the senior, most experienced people who read the seismic data had given instructions on where and how deep to drill an exploratory well. In the past, their instructions would have been carried out as given. They would have accepted no other result. In this case, the more junior people, building on their experiences with OL, offered their opinions on the data and their interpretation of where they should drill. They said the seismic data indicated a dome at a lesser depth and suggested targeting the well at that dome. That they spoke out and the senior people listened was unusual and counter to Thai and company cultures. It was agreed to drill to the location of the suspected dome instead of to the original location. The result was a savings of $3.4 million in drilling costs, a reduction in drilling time, and a tripling of the total reserve.
- A vice president in charge of a large natural gas production operation in the Gulf of Thailand told another story. After being promoted to take over the production facility, he saw an opportunity to increase the sale of natural gas. But it required a major increase in production output. Using OL tools, he established communication with all the workers (not just the managers) in defining their direct connection to the enterprise's success. Together, they developed a commitment to create the needed production increase. The result was an increase in production from 550 million cubic feet of natural gas per day to 650 million—an increase of 18% with no added manpower or premium costs. Later, after the results were in, senior managers recognized the workers' effort and gave bonuses to all involved.
- As a result of the new approach to strategic planning, the operations division (responsible for all production) committed to an additional 15% reduction in the cost of production and a new effort to achieve operational excellence.
- Dialogue and the use of reflective partners spread throughout the organization. In one example, a department manager had engendered fear in all his people. They would watch his eyes to determine his mood and felt that he did not believe them. A dialogue was conducted by Ketsara as part of the OL effort, and the ensuing conversation shocked the manager. He said he did not intend to behave that way and would try to change. The department members are now working together smoothly.
- Most top management people now have reflective partners and bring them to key meetings. Ketsara and the senior people recognized a significant improvement in how they prepare for meetings and how they listen to each other. One observed that there were fewer cross-conversations in senior management meetings and that the conversation tools and VDM were used in most department meetings. In January 2002, a reflective partner attended the board of directors' meeting for the first time.
- Fewer decisions from senior management meetings are being brought back to the group for reevaluation. When it becomes evident in a meeting that there are different mental models inherent in statements, the president asks for a reflective conversation to understand each mental model before the meeting can continue.

Lessons Learned

1. **Get commitment to the project.** If I had only one lesson to offer, it would be to make sure the client understands fully that this is not a quick fix—that all personnel will have to make a substantial time commitment and that the client's up-front commitment is an essential ingredient. One of the biggest mistakes I made, one that cost months of wasted effort and agonizing meetings, was not obtaining that up-front commitment. I thought I was making it easier for the client by rejecting the idea of signing a one-year contract with appropriate cancellation penalties before we started. Instead I said that we would stop the effort any time either of us believed my visits were not adding significant value. In fact, not knowing from visit to visit how much longer we would continue caused a wait-and-see attitude and a consequent lack of commitment in the early months.
2. **Have sensitivity but not subservience to the culture.** My second major mistake in working within the Thai culture was my lack of sensitivity and how it might affect what I could see and understand. I had been visiting Thailand for 20 years, mostly for pleasure, before this assignment. I had some understanding of Thai customs and believed that I could work effectively in the culture. I failed to recognize that I was not getting the level of honesty I expected in people's feedback. My insensitivity prevented me from understanding that my message was not getting through as effectively as I would have liked.

   How could I have assumed that organizational learning principles of open, honest communication were being accepted, when Thai culture considers "face" most important? The organization colluded with me in order to save my "face" by not telling me that my message needed to be modified. If I had been more sensitive from the beginning, I might have been able to modify the message by advancing a dialogue held much later in the engagement about the influence of "face" on effectiveness in business.
3. **Before the start of the project, agree on what success will look like and whose participation in the process will be essential.** Agreement on what to measure to define success, how to measure, and how much is enough is essential before the start. I spent many meetings trying to answer the same questions about what results we were getting and where we were going. Once we understand success, we can name the people in the organization who will be critical to that success. Obtaining the commitment of those critical people to participate actively in the whole process will make the effort considerably more effective.
4. **Create an internal partnership and an internal capacity-building structure.** My partnership with Ketsara helped me to understand what was happening and helped translate my thoughts when they were not understandable in the culture. Ketsara worked with key leaders between visits and coached the reflective partners. Her efforts were absolutely essential to the success of the project.
5. **Use the vision deployment matrix (VDM) in conjunction with the new strategic planning process.** I am most proud of the new approach we developed for strategic planning. Incorporating the VDM into the strategic planning process and using the learning organization tools for grassroots strategic planning achieved a greater level of understanding and commitment throughout the company.

- One vice president pointed out that there had been a significant change in the administration and services department. In the learning labs, work on the new vision and values has become the basis for a new way of behaving. In a further investigation of the changes in the department, we found that: (1) Car Pool Services supplied mobile phones to the drivers so the passengers waiting for pickup and return can reach them; (2) the waiting area in the garage was decorated with flowers and furnished with couches; and (3) its use, restricted to managers, was expanded to all employees. Everyone appreciated this change because the waiting room is air-conditioned and the average temperature outside is in the low nineties. The head of the department now uses conversation tools in her staff meetings, and employees are no longer afraid to talk about their problems.
- In a meeting I attended with the reflective partners, Ketsara asked: "How many of you have observed a positive change in behavior?" Eleven raised their hands, while three said they observed little or no change. Some of their comments were:

> Alignment around department goals has resulted in increased sharing, dedication, and a better understanding of how departments need each other.
>
> They personally commit to their department vision; this year's work plan is aligned with that vision.

In one department, the manager created the vision and gave it to the employees; it was uninspiring.

The next question to the reflective partners was: ‘‘Has your reflective partnering work helped? If so, what is the difference you see?’’ Some comments from six of the people were:

There's an improvement in my boss. He changed from exploding to asking questions. He listens more to other's comments. He shows more respect.

There is better follow-up on work.

There has been more commitment to the tools and the use of dialogue to improve communication.

My boss tries to listen to other people's ideas. He used to just cut them off.

There is more focus on observable data instead of jumping to conclusions.

Vice presidents at management meetings are becoming less defensive in their behavior.

Plans for Progress and Sustainability

Senior managers have endorsed the following actions, which were planned for 2002 implementation:

- Create a learning center.
- Initiate a 360 degree feedback system for all managers and above. Evaluate the possibility of extending it to all levels.
- Establish a nine-meeting lecture and workshop series on OL for all new employees to help them understand the behavior the company wants.
- Design a guide for continuing the learning organization practices in every department.
- Continue the reflective-partnering program with the vice presidents.
- Set up a systems-mapping expert team available to help anyone in the company.
- Set up regularly scheduled, learning organization knowledge-sharing meetings.
- Provide support from Ketsara initially and later the reflective partners for any company group interested in conducting dialogues.
- Set up measures to permit evaluation and discussion with senior managers of progress toward becoming a learning organization.

Is It a Learning Organization?

Now that the project is complete, the obvious question is, ‘‘Is the company now a learning organization?” This question reminds me of taking a long car trip and hearing the small voice from the backseat asking, ‘‘Are we there yet?’’ Someone once told me that there is no ‘‘there’’ when it comes to learning organizations, that it is a process of becoming rather than being.

In answering the question, I would have to say that different parts of the organization and different key people are at different places along the journey. Our best clues are in the stories we hear and in the measurable results we can see:

- A manager described the ability of junior people to question their elders and superiors in the exploration project and of their superiors to listen to their work with the OL tools. This is an example of open, honest communication in pursuit of a shared exploration vision taking precedence over cultural norms.
- The ability to increase production by 18% is an example of commitment to a shared vision.
- The ability of a senior leader to enter an open, honest dialogue with workers outside the chain of command is an example of creating the passion for action.

Could these results have happened anyway? Perhaps, in time. Was there some other cause for these extraordinary results? Possibly. The people involved in the work attribute the results to OL. I believe the Thai company is well on the path of organizational learning, with Ketsara providing the internal capacity and the managers displaying the will to continue the journey. Efforts are continuing. I believe the company is making substantial progress and getting better results. I learned a great deal on this project and hope this summary proves helpful to other consultants and practitioners.

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Commentary

by Robert Hanig

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I thoroughly enjoyed reading Fred Simon's article for two reasons. First, there are few better examples of the intelligent application of learning organization principles, tools, and methods. Second, I was one of the practitioners considering and being considered for the project. This circumstance embodies one main reason I remain part of the SoL community—to benefit and learn from colleagues' efforts and experiences in the creation, expansion, and application of capabilities for individual and collective learning.

Simon's statement, "The greatest learning takes place in failure, when things don't go as expected," is a key theme and one lesson the organization should have learned from the manner in which Simon conducted the overall intervention. Although the impressive section on "Results of the OL Effort" is an example of the required, tangible results of the project, the subtle yet genuine modeling of the core tenets of the OL approach is of equal or greater value.

I am also reminded of the adage, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and he can feed himself for a lifetime," as I consider Simon's approach to enriching the company's strategic planning process. Rather than simply creating or enhancing a set of documents called a strategic plan, Simon's approach enhanced the capacity for fairly extensive, ongoing strategic conversation in both the tangible, results-oriented (using the vision deployment matrix) and cultural domains. This capacity, similar to the one explored by Kees Van Der Heijden (1996), is of greater value and is more enduring than simply creating and adhering to a particular plan based on a snapshot of the forces and circumstances influencing a system at a particular time.

As someone who has been involved in many global and multicultural projects, I appreciate the cultural challenges of this type of project. I have come to appreciate not only the differences but also the inherent value of cultural norms that may not make sense at first. Honoring the core intent of a custom while refining its application to contemporary challenges and structures is an expression of respect that often speaks louder than our ideas or concepts. Simon's approach of "reflective partnerships" is a wonderful example of creating a culturally acceptable way to explore different perspectives without the threat of "losing face" in a more public setting.

Finally, Simon's section on lessons learned is not only a valuable example of displaying one's reasoning and one's conclusions but also a wonderful start to a dialogue exploring what additional lessons a rich experience like this might contain—dialogue I intend to have with Simon in the near future.

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Opening Doorways to a Better Life at Work: A Conversation with Bill McQuillen

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The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.
—Henry David Thoreau

In July 1975, straight from college, Bill McQuillen joined Shell as a process engineer in the chemicals manufacturing plant in Louisiana and soon became the operations manager. After four years as an operations manager in a larger plant, he became manager of training and organizational effectiveness in a manufacturing complex of 3,000 employees. A tragic accident with seven fatalities in May 1988 caused a major shift in his life's work. He moved into a corporate role, starting as a technical manufacturing training manager, and found his way to the corporate center for organization development. He served as an architect for Shell's business and cultural transformation from 1993 to 1996, created the Shell Learning Center in 1996, and subsequently led the global Shell internal consultancy called LEAP (Leadership and Performance) in the Americas.

McQuillen has been associated with the MIT Organizational Learning Center (now SoL) since 1991 and has been serving on the SoL Governing Council since June 2000. A question asked at a council meeting triggered this conversation. Newly elected members were asked to share what they are really passionate about, how their work fuels their passion, and how what they do and who they are connects with SoL.

The first part of the conversation focuses on McQuillen's passion: to help people in various ways to improve the quality of their work experience. McQuillen explains how he has come to recognize his own gifts and his deep attraction for helping people. In the second part, we explore how a person can create the conditions to improve the quality of life at work or elsewhere and how to sustain them. Finally, the conversation reveals the impact of organizational learning work on Shell in the past decade.

Karen Ayas (KA): You have been with Shell for 26 years. And you say that you are still passionate about what you do. How do you keep your passion alive at work?

Bill McQuillen (BM): My passion is for helping people in a variety of different ways. I have been doing that since my early days at Shell. In both my engineering job and my operations management job, I would spend 90% of my time talking to people about what they were experiencing in their work and how they could change it to be more satisfying for their lives and their work. Later on, I moved into doing the same thing on an organizational level.

The senior leaders who were watching me at the time asked me to take on a formal role to develop leaders. That is how I moved into a training job. I was reluctant to do this at first, but after being in training and development, I began to discover the larger world of organization development (OD). At first, I was a single consultant doing all kinds of interesting things.

For the past 13 years, I've been focused specifically on training, development, leadership, systems thinking, strategic planning, organizational design, development, large-group interventions, change management, and so on. I never had any formal OD training. I've read a few books, of course, and attended some seminars. But I am far away from what I was educated to do. And almost exclusively, I use my intuition for what I think needs to be done.

I don't operate from the standpoint of gathered data and facts. I frequently use my gut sense of the way things are. When I propose solutions, I don't necessarily have a solid theoretical foundation. But what I've learned is that instinct and intuition may well be the most important things you have going for you. Explicit knowledge—what you can read about and learn about—may be far overstated as an important requirement for success. Maybe as you go through the formal education process, you actually diminish your own belief in the accuracy and efficacy of your intuition and instinct. Ten years ago, I first started realizing that if I would simply listen to my intuition, I would always be in touch with the real, authentic situation.

KA: What was your intuition telling you?

BM: That I am attracted to certain things in my work, because they seem to resonate with a bigger purpose, destiny, or calling. The more I paid attention to what seemed to deeply capture my interest, the more I lined up with everybody around me.

This kind of introspective conversation made me realize that I'm terribly interested in the quality of people's experience on earth. I have a general sense that most people aren't very happy. Thoreau said, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." A couple of key things about that statement are that it's about the "masses" and it's about "quiet" rather than expressed desperation. It's very difficult to work on anything that is not made explicit. So I spend a lot of time simply trying to find out what seems to be happening in people's hearts and minds.

KA: Why are other people's experiences so important to you? What influences shaped you?

BM: My mother influenced me in a most remarkable way. When I was four years old, my mother would sit with my brother, who is a year younger, under one arm and me under the other arm to keep control of us while we were in church. In those days, this lasted for an hour and a half, a miserable experience for a four-year-old kid. My mother noticed me watching an interaction between another mother and child, who had been misbehaving. His mom slapped him in the face really hard. My mother leaned over and whispered in my ear, "What do you suppose that child is thinking right now?"

KA: You were only four years old and yet you remember this so vividly?

BM: It was transformative in the way that I experienced life. By eighth grade, I was already operating on a bit of a different wavelength from most of my friends. My mother sustained this because she would listen very carefully to what I was saying and talk to me.

I didn't recognize for many years that needing to create a better situation around me, as opposed to just being in a sort of state of stunned wonderment all the time, was a form of gift. There's a lot of unhappiness in our world, and the bulk of that unhappiness is generated within poorly constructed institutions. People who are living in nature, such as farmers or forest rangers, have a different quality of experience in what it means to be human. Growth is ostensibly a fairly painful process. Learning is invariably attended by some kind of negative emotion. Creating any kind of a meaningful relationship is rife with all kinds of negativity.

Needing to create a better situation around me was a form of gift.

In many Western societies, we're taught that we should strive for safety, security, and stability. People get set on that course, like the Great American Dream to have two homes, many grandchildren, and by age 60, you sit on your butt with your feet up and cruise for 40 years. That's not living.

Of the people that I encounter, 75% are always grinding away at some pretty major problem with their world. When I finally began to recognize that, I started caring a lot about what people said about their experiences. There isn't anything more important to me than understanding how the average person feels and thinks about what is happening inside of Shell.

Enhancing the Quality of Workplace Experiences

KA: What can you do about what people are experiencing? How can you improve the situation?

BM: Very often I help them reframe what they're experiencing. I just help them develop a new language for describing what they're experiencing—a language that has more perspective, which embraces diversity. Frequently, all it takes to improve people's whole outlook on life is a good conversation about how they're thinking about their experiences and offering them some new ways to think.

On the other hand, as I talk to enough people in a system, I begin to recognize that there are enormous structural defects in the way that we have created companies. They almost institutionally prohibit people from feeling alive.

KA: Can you give me some example of such structural defects?

BM: Look at the number of levels of approval it takes to get expense reimbursements in some big companies. That formal policy has existed for 50 or 60 years and is essentially rooted in the fact that you do not trust your own people. The company is doing all kinds of other things to show how much it trusts people, yet still has all these countereffective structures, some very subtle.

My role, as I see it, is to be a burr under the saddle, to be thorn in the side, to be a grain of sand in the oyster, and then sustain the irritation, which is a form of creating tension. And to have confidence that the process of the collective will resolve favorably.

My role is to be a burr under the saddle and then sustain the irritation, which is a form of creating tension.

KA: How do you create the conditions for that to happen?

BM: By bringing my whole self into every circumstance. For instance, I usually bring my nonsensical self and my highly liberalized self when operating in a highly conservative environment, or I bring my American self when I'm in an international environment. I bring my right brain and my left brain and manifest that in my behavior. It is an almost seductive invitation to other people to do the same. You can almost feel everyone in the room change. A lot has to do with walking around with a huge respect for other people and seeing them as myself.

All the ways in which people see themselves as different actually don't exist. William Isaacs's concept, "fragmentation is an illusion," is absolutely profound. When you consider all the ways in which people are the same, the differences become insignificant. If you live in a world of noticing differences, you will always be confirming to yourself that there's a separation between me and you. If you see another living, breathing human being, then we can embrace each other in a different way. I can love your dark side—the things you think are really wrong with you—probably more than you can. The more I do that, the more I can cause people's favorable dimensions to emerge.

KA: How much of that can you really bring into a work context? How many people can you have an impact on?

BM: I do a lot of large-group interventions, big workshops with 200 to 300 people. I sometimes look at my workshops as a bully pulpit, not in a literal sense, but as I design the events, I include stuff that helps to create a learning environment. People experience these workshops as helpful, engaging, and entertaining.

For example, in a big workshop to launch the new IT organization, I held a dialogue with the top 240 leaders of the IT community, which I labeled the "IT leadership community." Ten minutes from the end, someone said, "You know, it just occurred to me that we really have been behaving like a community here.'' Some questioned if we were behaving as a community because of the label. That may have helped. But, consistently, when I open workshops and say, ''Good morning, Champions,'' it works. If I say, ''Greetings, O Great One,'' it works.

It makes good intuitive sense to me. I love to go into a meeting and say, in a kind of amused tone, looking up in the corner, ''I wonder what we're going to be able to create together over the next two days.''

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KA: Does that work all the time because people listen to the question? Is inviting them in the key?

BM: Yes, it's also giving permission and signaling that something is going to be different. It's inviting a whole different way of being into the room, welcoming the side of people that frequently gets ignored. Our institutional norms have tried to create conformance. It's so much easier to manage then.

KA: You would probably say that conformance prevents people from bringing their authentic selves to the organization. How do you help people break free of this conformance?

BM: My approach has to do with the fact that all forms of change, all forms of development, pass through the doorway of awareness. So, first and foremost, the initial step is always raising awareness of what is real. Once you have one foot planted firmly in reality, you can start to become visionary. I try to raise people's awareness of their actual experience. Gradually, I move the conversation from ''them, there and then'' to ''us, here and now.'' This is very delicate, almost manipulative work.

I've been successful with two or three leadership teams who have understood that they don't need to go any further than themselves to understand almost anything about the system. Some, because of the heavy responsibility of leadership, pretend that things aren't really the way they are. But deep down in their souls, they're actually experiencing what other people are experiencing. Even if they're at the top, they're experiencing it. Some are masking it; others are in denial.

KA: But they may not even be aware.

BM: That's true. There are also many senior people who are really unhappy. Their ability to influence anything is pretty small. Because of fairly low self-esteem, they feel emasculated; they really don't have all the power that their title suggests they have. Most senior leaders can't imagine anyone else feels this way. They think this is a unique part of being on top.

As soon as leaders begin to listen to people, they can see what really needs attention.

The secret to change is all bottled up in that incipient moment in time when a leader finally says leadership has almost nothing to do with the way he or she thinks and feels. It has to do with the way *they* think and *they* feel. As soon as leaders begin to listen to people, they can see what really needs attention.

Helping Senior Leaders

KA: Do you frequently encounter resistance when you try to help?

BM: Most of my work is attended by an enormous amount of resistance. Usually, I do not start working with the larger system until I have established with the top person and his or her leadership team what we collectively believe should be the direction.

No matter where I'm working, that's my predominant way to enter the system. I may find out in the first 15 minutes of conversation that they don't know for sure why they want what they want. They're not operating on really solid ground to begin with. So one of two things will happen. One is that I simply help them come up with a different aspiration than the one they began with. The second is that they realize that the distance between what they want and where they currently are is a lot more significant than they thought. I help them appreciate that they, as the senior sponsoring group, are going to have to be terribly committed to this whole process if we're going to go from where they are to where they want to be.

I tell them that I've never run a business and that they shouldn't ask me to help them decide where they should go. What I do instead is to help them create a high-quality space and environment for a rich conversation in which where to go becomes self-evident. You don't have to dream this up. You need to talk about the situation and the system, and eventually it'll occur to all what the next step should be. There's always a sensible way in which systems evolve and progress. You need to discern what it is. But it's hard to do that amid an advocacy war, sitting around a table with people screaming at each other. I just try to calm everyone down and make better sense of what they want and where they currently are. Sometimes, people see me as a behavioral cop.

KA: A therapist too?

BM: Oh, definitely. It's always funny when someone says something like, ''I really don't know if I need any help or if I even really have a problem.''

I'm not afraid to reveal things about myself that I believe most people are afraid to reveal. I don't have any difficulties talking about my fears, shortcomings, and insecurities. I wear this stuff all over me, and sometimes people find that to be scary and intimidating. They don't want to be around me. But most people like it because it's another form of giving them permission to talk about something that is not the norm.

KA: You're showing vulnerability.

BM: Exactly. In my last job, my two chief accountabilities were to coach the chief information officer (CIO) of Shell and his leadership team. As I engage in those kinds of interventions, I discover frequently that they're most concerned about the group right below them. So I cascade or drill deep into the system, ultimately finding myself on the factory floor or with the people at the help desk, because I need to have a good appreciation of how the whole system works. I go out and have many conversations and then sit back and reflect. Then I'll say to the senior leader, ''You know, that's not consistent with what I actually experienced when I went out and talked to your people.'' Sometimes he'll say, ''Well, I think you're just making this up to try to leverage me.'' And I'll just reply, ''You don't need to take my word for this. I encourage you to go and find out.'' In and of itself, that's an enormous intervention. The CIO going to talk to the people who are running the help desk is unheard of. But as soon as the CIO talks to the people at the help desk, a whole bunch of things get better.

Legacy is the sum of the stories that people tell about you.

I tell the CIO that he has done the most important thing by indicating with his simple presence and generosity of spirit that he cares. That's what most people in organizations really want to know. What leaders fear is that they're going to go out there and be asked questions that they don't have the answers for. Or they'll get problems that they don't have solutions for. It just takes a small amount of coaching to help leaders deal with those little bugaboos, and then they discover that that's not what is going on at all.

The most fun I have in coaching executives is when I ask them what their legacy in the organization will be. For senior people, this is the first time that they've ever entertained the notion of legacy.

Legacy and Sustainability

KA: How would you define legacy?

BM: Legacy is the sum of the stories that people tell about you. It's not the edifices that you've built. It's not the masterful project management. It's not the P&L statement. It's the stories that they'll tell about you. So what stories do you want people to tell about you? And do you have any influence on the stories that people tell? The question creates interesting disturbances in people that are useful from a coaching standpoint. Even more useful is the question about what you're most afraid of in your work or in your personal life. What do you fear the most? It's typically not what comes first to mind, unless you've been on a great spiritual journey for some time. For most people, it's buried beneath a couple of layers.

KA: What would you like your legacy to be?

BM: That I helped people to see very different possibilities for what life is all about and what the human experience is all about. This is what I would like people to say about me: ''When I met that guy, he opened up some doorways and some avenues that really helped me a lot.'' That would be a satisfying result in my life, that somehow I helped people.

KA: The notion of legacy made me think of sustainability. Often it is easier to initiate changes than sustain them. As you coach or intervene in the system, there is a shift in the frame of thinking and acting. The client system in the organization you are working with gradually becomes more human and people feel more alive and whole. In your experience, how sustainable has that been?

BM: It depends on whether you can achieve critical mass or not. The longer I've worked in a system, the longer I've brought these kinds of concepts and this way of being, the more sustainable it is. I believe that a single individual can make an enormous difference in a large system. I've experienced it.

KA: Can you refer to a specific example?

BM: Frequently, there are some people in workshops who hold eye contact with me for an extended period of time. I sense that they're following me very carefully. About 75% of the time that I've had that experience, those people turned out to be operating according to beliefs similar to mine. I immediately invited them to lead what we're trying to do. I've walked up and said, ''You seem to really understand what I'm trying to create here, and I would love your help.'' Most people are enormously flattered.

A single individual can make an enormous difference in a large system.

After a while, you may end up with 15, 18, or 20 such people in a room. And if you can sustain a more authentic way of being with one another in a room for two days, I think you get three to six months of momentum in the entire system as a result. That manifests itself sometimes as a new form of excitement or proliferation of an optimistic curiosity.

KA: Do you organize periodic events to sustain the excitement?

BM: Definitely. I've had a couple of relationships within client systems at Shell for 12 to 18 months of sustained work. I have observed the excitement that follows an important large event in which people are very authentic and truthful with each other, and that percolates throughout the system for three to six months. The quality of that improves over several cycles. We can start the second major event at a much higher plane than we started the first one.

KA: I couldn't agree with you more. But how do you frame such initiatives so that top management accepts and supports them?

BM: I'm usually doing two things all the time. One is what other people seem to expect of me. The other is what I really think I should be doing. So, I'm always careful to satisfy what others expect of me, first and foremost, because I consider that to be earning my license to operate the way I want to. If I come in and try to change people's agenda, I'm in trouble. I always go with whatever it is that they seem to want to do. Something I've learned over the years is I don't care much about agreement on what we're going to work on. The important thing is to get the relationship established under whatever circumstances work for both parties.

Then, as I work on whatever they want to work on, I slowly interject questions that gradually move the agenda to where it needs to be. Sometimes that's where I think it needs to be, because my intuitions are reasonably accurate. Other times, where the group ends up is a complete surprise to me and to the sponsoring client.

Twice I started a three-day workshop with no agenda. Structured meetings frequently don't work because they are created by someone with a partial view of what is important some months before the meeting. There is a lot of spin going into what someone thinks is a worthwhile topic for a big group. No one individual knows what a group needs; the group itself knows. This is a dialogic concept having to do with how radically different collective intelligence is from the sum of the product of individuals. You have to believe that there is an otherworldly entity called the collective. And you have to have confidence that it's real and attend to it. And guess what? It begins to show up. It's the most amazing thing when I get into that sort of flow with the group, where they're experiencing something that I think they know in their heart of hearts they could not experience as individuals.

Organizational Learning

KA: It strikes me that you have not made any reference to organizational learning. Shell has been a pioneer in the development of the organizational learning tools and methods as a member of MIT's Organizational Learning Center (OLC) in 1991. And my understanding based on the success stories I have heard and read is that OL was instrumental in creating profound change led by Phil Carroll. Where were you during this period? Were you involved?

BM: I was Linda Pierce's [then executive director to the Executive Leadership Team] lieutenant, her right-hand man, during the emergence of all of this. When Phil Carroll took over as CEO in 1993, he knew about me because of some disturbing questions I asked him in public. He had a different reaction than other senior leaders might. He recognized a question that had value and merit rather than thinking about who asked the question.

He called me one day to tell me he was getting ready to transform Shell. He was looking for some really good people who care about the human element at work to become architects of the transformation. He asked if I'd be interested.

I couldn't say yes fast enough. Linda was the primary adviser and coordinator of what we did at Shell. I was her arms and legs. Then I gradually became another form of Linda's voice and eventually became another form of Phil's voice. I was deeply involved and spent lots of time coaching the top 200 leaders at Shell Oil. I helped work out some new things in our governance model.

KA: So why didn't you mention organizational learning when we talked about how to improve people's experiences?

BM: I typically do not use buzz words, terminology, or labels for organizational learning. I'm very conscious of the language that I use within Shell. I use a lot of the OL concepts, tools, and methods, but I don't tell people that I'm using them. If I talk to people about personal mastery or creating shared vision, their attention just switches off. They're inoculated against this stuff.

KA: Why? What can we learn from this?

BM: There are two main reasons why OL at Shell got out of control. Back in 1995, there were about 200 people who went through intensive development programs at the OLC and deep personal mastery experiences that were all rooted in the disciplines of the learning organization. Many became mindless zealots, to the extent that you couldn't have a meeting without a lengthy check-in at which some fairly senior people were baring their souls. That was never the intention of a check-in, yet they somehow took it to a ridiculous degree, and it was in vogue.

There are a lot of examples of this zealotry, but suffice it to say that about 25 or 30 of these people, in various places throughout the US, behaved in a really funny way. Of those who had been through similar developmental experiences, 75% weren't behaving that way and were the harshest critics. One example is when people got hold of the concept of the ''left-hand column.'' Some senior Shell person would say, ''All right, time out. It's time to do a left-hand column check. I want everybody to give me the worst that you've got going.'' That's not what was intended with the left-hand column, of course. You don't dump your toxic load. But they would do that. At one chemical plant, the leadership team had a weekly meeting with a feature on the agenda called the ''Left-Hand Column Dump.''

So some of this was zealotry or a misunderstanding and misuse of the concept. But Phil Carroll and some other fairly senior people went overboard telling stories of what was happening at Shell and improvements in performance that were chiefly due to the OL work. Later, Shell's financial performance in the US dropped like a rock. Phil Carroll left Shell right before things turned sour. He and the board couldn't come to terms. He wanted to stay for five more years to see his vision through because he had just gotten started. People couldn't bring themselves to say that the reasons why things didn't work very well was because of three or four terrible business decisions that upset the whole portfolio. It was the wrong period of time; there was a huge cost structure and few revenue sources. But people couldn't say it was due to a lack of good business sense. So instead, they blamed all the ''voodoo'' stuff that Peter Senge brought in. Senior people said this in public, and it spread like wildfire throughout the company. All the advocates slowly moved off the front lines and took a couple of steps back. Many have continued to live, advocate, and celebrate the whole body of work, but they've been doing it in a more quiet, circumspect way.

KA: So do you believe that OL has been helpful to Shell? What has shifted in the past 10 years?

BM: The quality of relationships, manifested by the quality of conversation, has gone way up in this period of time. The way people interact in meetings shows whether relationships are good or bad. Conversations have become quite open, partially due to a three-day learning experience using OL tools. Bringing the conversational tools of engagement to bear on business situations, of course.

We did this with a large group of people at Shell, some 20,000 outside the US. Inside the US, we had close to 10,000. In our chemicals organization, every single person learned these skills. That took about four years of sustained resolve by a senior leadership group. In that organization, you can smell the difference when you walk in.

KA: This is a success story I have not heard before, quite an impressive one.

BM: It's definitely one worth writing about. The problem I have with some of the stories about Shell is that they made the key individuals seem like very important people. It's not that they weren't, but they weren't as instrumental and integral to what happened as they suggested in their writing.

People are self-serving to a certain degree in what they write, especially in success stories. When someone like Peter Senge asks someone like Phil Carroll to tell his story, Phil would tell the story in a way that makes himself look really good. Even if that's not the case, listeners would infer that. What was really taking place inside Shell is a more complicated situation than can be accounted for by the special guy that Phil is. He was an enabler to something that was waiting to happen.

KA: It's so difficult to capture the story of the transformation in large, complex organizations. Most transformation stories have no single ''hero.'' Yet that's what people want to hear, and what publishers seek.

BM: Sure, but for me, what's always missing from the story is that the essence of the good idea—the essence of the change—already existed before the hero showed up. Rarely does this key individual bring in the wisdom that helps cause a change to occur. The best kind of leaders come in, listen, and discover what wants to emerge and then enable it.

KA: They just find a way to tap into the collective intelligence and put it to work.

BM: Exactly. But it's a very scary thing for a leader, in the current business climate, to go into a situation that may be rife with problems, with an approach that taps into the collective intelligence. There's almost something counterintuitive about that. If the collective intelligence is there, why isn't high performance there as well?

Commentary

by Linda Pierce

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Bill McQuillen's story is familiar and consistent with my own experience. This is not surprising because we worked closely together during Shell Oil's transformation led by CEO Phil Carroll. And it is not surprising that I take issue with some of McQuillen's comments. For example, I don't agree with his definition of the American Dream, or his assertion that most learning and relationships involve pain and negative emotions, or the story behind Phil Carroll's choice to leave Shell, or the judgment that other people's stories are self-serving.

After teasing out the few parts with which I take issue, I find a valuable story for champions of change in a large system. Change agents must have a clear purpose and a set of operating principles that guide their work authentically. Without such a model, the risk of being seen as a manipulator is high. McQuillen shares the core of his operating model. I offer the following as headline descriptions of some of these principles, as I hear them, and encourage the reader to discover the deep meaning in McQuillen's story:

1. Listen to my intuition so that I can always be in touch with the real, authentic situation.
2. Bring my whole self into every circumstance to awaken and invite the amazing latent diversity and talent in others.
3. Raise the awareness of what is real with "us, here and now" as the first step toward creating vision.
4. Provide support in creating the space and environment for rich conversation in which where to go becomes self-evident.
5. Be vulnerable to encourage useful vulnerability in others.
6. Earn my license to operate by satisfying what others expect of me, while doing what I think I ought to be doing.

This interview is a gift to readers whose work is to lead or support large-scale change processes. Readers can use McQuillen's operating model as an example to form their own model. Several years ago, with a great deal of reflection, I articulated my own set of change-agent principles, and they continue to be my daily guide.

McQuillen refers to a definition of legacy that I find very useful: our legacy is the sum of the stories that prevail in the world about us. The stories are not created directly from our intentions but rather from how others experience us. By having an authentic, articulated operating model to guide our choices and behaviors, we as change agents are investing in our legacy. This interview provides a template for that investment.

From Performance to Presence: The Organic Nature of Learning and Change

Michael Jones

The boundaries of my language
Are the boundaries of my world.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein

The room filled quickly. Soon the air was thick with the smell of beer and smoke. Noisy voices drowned out my quiet, thoughtful improvisations. ''What am I doing here?'' I asked myself as waiters rushed by, their trays heavy with glasses of cold draft beer. Looking around at the hard faces, I put aside the idea of playing show tunes. I left out Chopin and Debussy as well.

It was the third night I had played at this hotel. I absorbed myself in an arrangement of ''Summertime,'' moving languidly through a progression of dark, minor chords. The noise in the room seemed faint now, as if it were miles away. I was lost in my own musings when, suddenly, a glass of beer smashed against the wall near the piano. It was followed immediately by another. Within moments, the entire room was a brawling mass. I jumped up, closed the piano lid, stepped off the stage, and walked quickly to the offices at the back of the hotel. There I met the owner who, taking me firmly by the arm, said, ''I'm paying you a buck an hour to keep this room happy. When the room is happy, *this* does not happen. Now go back there and play something to cheer up the room!'' Within moments, I was back at the piano. I played as if my life depended on it! I was a different piano player after that night: I no longer got lost in the music. Instead, I learned to ''feel'' the room, and I discovered that as I allowed myself to connect with it, it gave itself back to me. Soon the anonymous surroundings of the place took on an intimate, human face (Jones, 1995: 85).

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In recent conversations with John, a senior vice president of sales and marketing with a Canadian medical supplies firm, my thoughts returned to that summer I played at the hotel. I first met John while assisting with a strategy meeting at which 200 of his company's employees and managers, including the president and senior executive team, engaged in a series of conversations about the highlights of their company's story and history, their current reality, including their hopes and adversities, and possible scenarios for a creative future. Immediately following this meeting, John had arranged to take his sales and marketing team—a group of approximately 80 people—to a three-day offsite national sales meeting. As we later reflected on what he had learned from this meeting, John described his own moment of truth when he also needed to ''feel'' the room:

> I had originally planned to take the group through a series of PowerPoint presentations highlighting the financial priorities, strategies, and goals for the business over the next year or so. But it was clear immediately following the first meeting that to proceed with my original plan

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> simply wouldn't work. I could no longer hide behind the sales numbers, graphs, or technical expertise.
>
> People were too excited and engaged. I knew I needed to drop my plan, but I did not have any idea what to put in its place. I was new to this group and so I needed to prove myself and establish who I was. But I knew that what I already knew how to do simply wouldn't work.

John knew that he needed both to be ready to step out in front of people and to be with them—to find strength in being vulnerable:

> I knew that if I could trust in the power of the moment, I would find a more engaging, creative way of conducting business and that this would guide me in the future. This would be more challenging, but it would also yield much more than what I already knew of myself as a leader.
>
> What scared me was that I knew that by engaging others in this way, I would no longer control the outcome of the meeting; I could not foresee where it would lead or what it would ask of the company's leadership. And what was *most* frightening was that because I would not be reporting from any established body of knowledge or expertise, I would be in a sense relinquishing my authority to speak.

As John spoke, I reflected on my own experiences as a performing pianist as well as a speaker and facilitator. I remembered how I often have felt challenged to free myself from the understandings I have held in memory in order to ease into the inner teachings of the moment. Speaking from memory, which I think of as ''thought speech,'' assumes its authority from a body of content and expertise. ''Living speech,'' on the other hand, reflects our thinking and experience *as it is made in the moment*—including our doubts, perplexities, questions, aspirations, and fears.

Poet William Stafford suggests that this manner of speaking offers unique challenges:

> You start without any authority, if you were a scientist . . . if you were an explorer who had gone to the moon, if you were a knowing witness about the content being presented . . . whatever you said would have the force of that accumulated background and information; and any mumbles, mistakes, dithering could be forgiven as not directly related to any authority you were offering (Stafford, 1978: 62).

But for a poet, he adds, ''Whatever you are saying, and however you are saying it, builds its authority from the performance in front of us, or it does not build'' (Stafford, 1978: 63). This is the unique challenge of a living speech. ''Artists are alive in the presence of experience,'' Stafford says. ''This is their job'' (Stafford, 1986: 68).

This is the new challenge for leaders as well. In a world of accelerating, unexpected change, none of us can any longer depend on simply downloading information from memory, because whatever we might offer on that basis is already out of date. Increasingly, the intuitive insights that will matter most will be those that are living in us now. It may be that, in the future, all that leaders will have is the *now*. The courage to capture the feeling of what is alive now and bring it into words will make a crucial difference. This is not to imply that the past is irrelevant. It does suggest that memory is made more vital when it benefits from a fresh reading in the context of what is emerging in the moment.

This is what business needs now: people willing to speak out, to bring to the fore their unique point of view.

Perhaps this explains some of the challenges of leading in the moment. When we make this choice, our formal, positional authority is inevitably tested. Our primary authority becomes one not based on appointed position, but instead rooted in the ability to ask the right questions and bring forth a viewpoint that inspires others and helps them see their own unique gifts and inner strengths. In this sense, what we say matters. Our words somehow count for more in the currency between us and help determine whether others will share in the courage to bring their own voices forward. And this is what business needs now: people willing to speak out, to bring to the fore their unique point of view. Until we speak, we often don't know what those words will be. While perhaps not everyone has the gift of music or fine art with which to express him- or herself, we *all* have within us the possibility of developing a rich auditory imagination and, with this, the attendant gifts for speaking, listening, and teaching.

Listening for the "Feeling of the Moment"

This ''feeling of the moment'' is often vague and ephemeral, a flash of intuitive insight that plays at the edge of our conscious awareness. It rarely comes to us complete. While we may notice its existence at the periphery of our conscious attention, it is difficult to determine whether what we are sensing is real or imagined, and so we often consider it an untrustworthy guide; we disregard its subtle urgings.

At the same time, we are becoming aware that the universe in which we live is not just a giant clockwork in which everything is predetermined and stored in memory according to some master plan. And, what does reside in memory may not be as superior—or even as relevant—to the moment as these subtle intuitions.

Researcher Valerie Hunt, in describing the world as a collection of interrelated fields, says:

> The reality of the world lies in fields which interact with other fields of energy in dynamic chaos patterns that are always evolving to higher levels of complexity. This is an open system in which reality is tremendously complex. What we know as truth, intuition, and consciousness all operate independently with matter. Furthermore, they transform matter as they are transformed by it (Hunt, 1989: 49).

A field may be known by many names: *prana, chi, the primary source of being, the creative matrix, the timeless crossing time, the subtle intelligence of the heart, the intuitive imagination, the implicate order, the zone, the wave, the quality with no name,* or, as one jazz musician said, in struggling to find words to describe it precisely, ''a particular kind of love.'' Anything that attracts feeling or affect, including hunches, questions, sense impressions, musings, a found silence, or an unexpected encounter of any kind may bring up the ''field'' in which intuition flourishes.

My first encounter with this source of invisible intelligence occurred when I was about five, as I musically accompanied my friends in their orchestration of war games on the living room rug. As the pianist, I created a soundtrack that included the drumming of horses' hooves, cannon shots, and wind ruffling the banners. While in the midst of the ''battle,'' I experienced the sensation of not only playing the piano, but also of *being* played. This was a profound moment in which I realized that to create art, I also needed to be open to the possibility that *art creates itself.*

Can the words we choose change the structure of business to produce greater equality and creativity?

Movement teacher Emily Conrad D'aoud once said, ''You find the wave and you ride it.'' The day after my first revelation at the piano, I found that wave for two minutes and then lost it. The next day, three minutes—and the next day, nothing at all. Over the years, I have learned that it is easier to ride the wave when I forget myself. What has made the most difference have been the moments when I am able to create in a spirit of true reciprocity with someone else. In these moments, I have learned the field exists in relationships, in the space in between.

Many who have experienced this creative ''forgetting'' find themselves struggling to connect these somewhat ephemeral moments to the context of the day-to-day realities of running a business. The quantitative pressures of time and deadlines often keep us narrowly focused on the concrete, the specific, the measurable. Furthermore, the hierarchical structure of most business organizations does not often encourage authentic relationships. Our reward systems usually are based on a model of competition and individual achievement rather than creative collaboration. But as my friend John confided to me, ''These ideas connect perfectly for me when I think of the quality time I spend playing the guitar or preparing a meal, both of which I love to do. We need to find a way to balance quantity with quality.''

Language not only draws on our ability to inform, instruct, or measure, but also has an intrinsic qualitative ability to inspire and evoke, set the atmosphere or tone, open a space, reveal a hidden truth, provoke a question, or instill a moment of silence. Does language have the power to change our reality? Can the words we choose change the structure of business to produce greater equality and creativity?

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While it may be unrealistic to expect leaders to be artists, we all have an artistic sensibility that is strengthened when we stay connected to our own experience and trust in our own perceptions. Often this involves staying the course through the confusion of thoughts that arise between those moments when we have nothing to say and the next ones when we do.

Yet perhaps it is precisely in these moments of disorientation that the potential for innovation is most accessible. To restructure organizations for innovation, we also need to accept a certain period of confusion. What may be occurring, as we give up control based on what we believe *ought* to be happening, is the creation of room for what is *already* pressing to happen naturally. Yet giving ourselves over to this deeper, innate intelligence is what we usually resist the most. When we shift our attention from trying to manage or coordinate action to sensing what is already forming, we open the way for a deeper pattern of coherence to emerge. Whether in music or meetings, the basic principle is that creation creates itself.

When we restructure the role of language and give back to it some of its power to reflect on experience, we also give back to the world some of the beauty and radiance that an imaginative language once held. That is a primary challenge in articulating. We rarely adjust our listening to hear, or we don't feel *our* insights or ideas are significant or dignified enough to pay attention to. The posture that prepares us for receiving and articulating is one of readiness and availability. It involves a shift of mind from an emphasis on time based on action, usefulness, and results to a creative form of timeless time, based on thoughts ''found,'' ideas borrowed, time wasted, and the generativity gleaned in the space between the notes.

Leading in Turbulent Times

The organizations that will thrive in this new century are those whose leaders recognize the presence of this ''space'' and, in response, begin to move from the reductionist, linear, and narrowly disciplined industrial model to a biological model that is more nuanced and pluralistic—and therefore more comfortable with uncertainty, surprise, and constant change. In an accelerating culture of ''fast knowledge,'' leaders will be required to respond to a variety of unfolding situations in which the problems are ill defined, the solutions vague or unknown, and the appropriate responses untrainable.

In the past, leaders faced problems that were primarily technical in nature. They could often perform based on their ability to clearly define the problems, along with the methods to apply in the search for solutions to correct them. Now the problems and the solutions are highly complex and social, revealing themselves as aesthetic, ecological, or spiritual in nature. In this sphere, problems often escape definition, and the solutions appear unclear or unsolvable.

Interestingly, however, as problems and solutions grow in complexity, so does subtle intelligence expand to meet them. Leaders need to gain access to our unique human gift for finding the threshold between the known and the unknown, through creating space for depth and listening, and finding time for reflection, openness, discovery, and surprise.

This shift to a new perspective is based more on an ecology of the senses and the fluidity of the moment than on fixed structures. It represents the movement toward seeing organizations as luminous, living communities that take nature and the artistic as their model and, as such, are infinitely improvisational, seeing learning and adaptation as a natural part of ongoing evolution. And, while in the mind's eye, in this way of seeing we may have the benefit of purpose, direction, focus, willfulness, action, and clear sight, in reality when orienting our listening to the moment, we must also invite ambiguity, trust, silence, willingness, and risk—qualities that the leader often has been conditioned to avoid. Faced with this reality, there is a temptation to postpone action for another time when we may feel more inspired and prepared and also feel faith in the process. Often, with imaginative thought, we don't know if we have reached the right place until after we have arrived.

The experience of feeling the room was an epiphany for John. It represented a fundamental shift of mind in the evolutionary journey from management to leadership. Management spends much of its time reacting to problems and controlling events. Leadership means getting ahead of the problems, and to do this involves thinking about the architecture of space. Only when we have sufficient space do insights for change arise naturally from within, without the external pressure to perform.

This may mean rethinking meetings and leadership retreats as practice areas for sensing the emergent properties of this invisible intelligence. Leaders rarely have the opportunity to practice this. To do so would involve being attentive to the design, atmosphere, and texture of the meeting space as well as to the structure and schedule of events. In this context, speakers would come not only to report on content or expertise but also to bring their own dilemmas, questions, and curiosities into conversations that contribute to ''seeding the space.'' When our speaking is a form of self-revelation, we are better able to reflect on practice and, in turn, discover the evocative power of language through learning to improvise with words. In this way, we can invent new knowledge and insight for sensing an unknown and turbulent future together, a future whose uncertainty overwhelms us when we try to face it alone.

Myths That Impede Presence

The approach I have outlined here would make perfect sense to an artist. Artists spend as much as 95% of their time in practice. Through repetition, reflection, inquiring, noticing, and questioning, they create a space in which to reveal the rich, intuitive insight and imagery they hold in their minds.[1] In this dedicated search for an authentic voice, they also know that they are evolving a heightened capacity for feeling and perception that makes them better able to sense and articulate possibilities that were not apparent when they began their work. By contrast, in most organizations, there is little time for thoughtful preparation, inquiry, or rehearsal. Most people spend as much as 95% of their time performing. Everything is done on ''real'' time.

Busyness becomes a strategy for trying to defeat the violent pressure of the clock.

This preoccupation with performance sets time as the adversary. Instead of being absorbed in time, busyness becomes a strategy for trying to defeat the violent pressure of the clock. This has led to certain myths about what constitutes organizational priorities that often serve as impediments to the authentic expression of one's own voice. These are more than beliefs; they represent the deep structures that compose the cultural story in which we live. And, because they move in sympathetic vibration with one another, each reinforces the other by what we do and say. There are four central myths that impede performance, or presence.

1. The Myth of the Ultimate Truth

With this myth, we are given to believe that there is a single right answer to anything. Behind this belief is the prevailing fear that if others don't conform to our answer, chaos will occur. Anything that cannot (or will not) be questioned or challenged—including mission statements, budgetary processes, policies, or practices—tends to move from guideline to edict to ultimate truth. This myth also tends to promote exclusive ''clubs'' through the development of accrediting bodies and professional associations, which in turn become isolated by adopting a language code that others cannot decipher. In accepting this myth as true, we also give up our own voice to experts and specialists through feelings of personal inadequacy or simply believing that we are somehow not qualified to speak. In this way, we allow others to define us.

For a musician who accepts this myth, the ultimate truth may be in the way he or she performed the composition yesterday; for the corporate manager, it may well be last year's sales figures or the standards outlined in company policy documents. To this way of thinking, whatever we hold in memory and act on without question becomes the ultimate truth.

2. The Myth of Separation

In this myth, we objectify the world, and by doing so, we see the world not as a natural extension of life but as a resource. Canadian philosopher George Grant describes the process of objectification: ''Object means literally . . . summonsing of something before us . . . so that it is forced to give its reasons for the way it is as an object'' (Grant, 1986: 36). When we try to force movement toward predetermined goals or ends or force imaginative hunches and echoes to stand up to the cold light of experimental analysis, something of the inner life fades away. By separating ourselves from nature's organic and consistent cycles of growth and decay, we also become disconnected from the inner sense of union with the larger dimensions of a life of which we are a natural part. It takes a conscious commitment to reconnect these severed rhythms.

John, for example, said that in planning his sales meeting, he decided at the last minute to shift the location from a sunny resort in Mexico to a potentially snowbound location in the heart of Quebec. He believed that it was important that the group not rush to the airport to catch an airplane but instead take the train. The experience, of traveling together—of slowing the pace, enjoying the scenery, listening to live music, and having time to deepen their conversation—nourished their sense of common connection.

John recognized that what changes people is beauty. When we slow our pace, we also widen our span of perception to see the familiarity of the world and business through fresh eyes. His approach yielded creative results that no one could have predicted.

3. The Myth of Efficiency

This myth implies that it is possible—and even preferable—to bring all of life's unruly elements under our direct control. The fear in this instance is that everything is up to us; if we don't use planning and force to hold it all together, everything will spin out of control.

In John's case, he sensed the excitement and enthusiasm of those coming to the meeting as soon as he changed the location. In turn, he altered his plan to accommodate larger possibilities—but not before the intensity of the feeling in the room taxed his own inner capacity to respond. This kind of courageous work often stretches us beyond the efficiency of our best corporate instincts.

As soon as John shifted his orientation to the larger space around him, he was given his words. They were drawn directly from the thought that emerged in the space between him and the group. This reality of spontaneous creation is a reminder that we do not control anything. Instead, by directing our attention in a way that includes the sense of ''otherness''—which may be another person, a group, or an organization (or, for an artist, a keyboard, a canvas, or a tree)—we open sufficient space for insights to flow.

4. The Myth of Scarcity

In this myth, we believe that creative ability and original thought are narrowly distributed. For one person to win, therefore, another must lose. This myth is grounded in the fundamental belief that the world is a battleground and, as such, is capricious and hostile. We forget that, while the growth of human consciousness is dependent on certain reasonable limits, we live in an ever-expanding universe. Collective intelligence is augmented, not diminished, by the creative demands we place on it.

When John reflected on the results of the meeting, what he most remembered was how simple it turned out to be. ''It seemed counterintuitive,'' he observed. ''There is such cultural stress on having access to factual information, on being logical, linear, and clear. I had to let go of all of that. And when I did, the concerns I had about taking this leap of faith actually proved groundless. There seemed to be a convergence of forces and

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serendipitous events that would have been too complex to have been arranged for or planned in advance.''

Each of these myths is based on a basic fear of life. Perhaps they educated us for the Industrial Age to protect us from the irrational impulses of the imagination, when mechanistic and practical thinking became expedient. Unfortunately, in separating us from the imagination, they also inhibited our access to a vast field of intelligence, which is home for imaginative thought.

The myth of ultimate truth, for example, is based in fear of uniqueness, diversity, and the legitimacy of our own viewpoints. The myth of separation is based in fear of the world and disconnects us from a sense of belonging and the love of place that brings beauty and radiance to language. The myth of efficiency locks us in a world of order and structure that causes us to mistrust the spontaneity of the spoken word. The myth of scarcity has contributed to language becoming an instrument for struggle and competition. We forget that if we can discover an expressive language that is adequate to our own thought, then language can be a source of abundance and we can once again be heartfelt with words.

Changing the Light by Which We Live

Crossing the threshold from performance to practice will necessitate a shift of focus from the development of the intellect to an opening of the heart. While our mental models and knowledge may have helped us develop a discipline of the intellect, most of us have not yet cultivated an intelligence of the heart. As John saw in his meeting, when we try to respond to the complexity of cultural, social, spiritual, and ecological issues that are a part of any creative community, the intellect is easily lost without the guidance of an inspired, dedicated heart.

Joseph Chilton Pierce says that ''creative discovery . . . arises from the coupling of the intellect's passion with the deep intuitive and unfathomable mystery of the heart. Should the intellect win its battle with heart's intelligence,'' he warns, ''then the war will be lost for all of us. We will be just an experiment that failed'' (Pierce, 1992: *xx*).

The first steps toward integration involve restoring those qualities of the imagination that serve to awaken the heart: courage, receptivity, connection, spontaneity, presence, feeling, reflection, and story.[2] I remember the autumn many years ago when my partner Judy and I started a journey to find this integration in our own minds and hearts. It began with the decision to sell our city home, close our consulting practices temporarily, buy a small motor home, and travel for a while. One day, a friend, sensing our struggle as we tried to map out our trip in detail, said to us, ''This is a wonderful opportunity to travel with a candle rather than a flashlight.'' This simple reframing—to alter the means of finding our way—changed our perspective. To find our way out of the impasse by which these myths have stopped us, we also need a different form of illumination. We need to change the light by which we live.

The light of a flashlight blinds us, effectively blocking our ability to feel and sense our way. The language is often too subtle and its volume too low for it to be detected in the glaringly illuminated, fast-knowledge world. Artists often speak of the passage through the dark night to explain how they learned to read the geography of the imagination. Leaders must also work now to navigate across an unknown, uncharted sea. Candlelight slows us down, its opaque light bringing into view subtle forms in the shadows that will serve as a new signpost to mark our way.

Leaders who recognize the power of words as signposts for creating our reality are willing to take the risk to dig deep for that ''something extra'' that even they cannot predict, because they don't know that it is there until it appears. In so doing, they fulfill the original role of the speaker who stands at the threshold, making the invisible visible.

With organic leadership, change can begin with one word. For John, that word was *nourishment*. It served as the signpost that guided him in introducing structures and processes that would bring sustenance to those he served. In this respect, words hold value not only for their own sake but because they lead us to those images that stand behind language, including a reclaiming of our uniqueness, a revival of relationships, and the restoring of our sense of place. In this space, we are free to be at play with words. Through language, we again come into intimate relationship with the timeless human desire for depth, discovery, presence, and surprise. As we make a home for ourselves in language, we also open the space for the innate intelligence to come to help us fulfill its deeper purposes. In this context, a community's gift for learning through articulation is not only to devise strategy, develop business plans, resolve conflicts, or solve problems, but also to create new and unexpected synergies through the re-imagining of an evocative language that elevates the subtle intelligence of the heart. This in turn equips us to foresee and even shape the future by recognizing the emergence of new patterns of relationship, acting coherently together.

Through language, we again come into intimate relationship with the timeless human desire for depth, discovery, presence, and surprise.

Just as artists commit to living a dedicated life, organizations and communities need to be intent on finding their collective voices and on furthering the work of language to lead us. We also need words that serve as beacons for navigating across an unknown sea—words that expand the boundaries of our world and whose quest for meaning draws us into a reflective frame of mind. Living speech will of necessity be a language of the heart in which words such as *forthrightness*, *vulnerability*, *humility*, *generosity*, *gratitude*, *silence*, *affection*, *obedience*, *grace*, and *reciprocity* will take on a new currency. The words we choose must be our own. We choose them because we have discovered, and are learning to live by, the unheard melody behind the word. Poet William Stafford writes:

> And so I appeal to a voice, to something
> shadowy.
> a remote important region in all who talk:
> though we could fool each other, we should
> consider—
> lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the
> dark.
>
> For it is important that awake people be awake,
> or a breaking line may discourage them back to
> sleep;
> the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—
> should be clear: the darkness around us is deep (Stafford, 1993: 135).

I last talked with John in midsummer following a sequence of strategy meetings. We were challenged to find even two words to describe the different qualities of silence that had emerged in the group conversations during their strategy conference. Just as the Inuit have more than 15 words to describe snow, we also need a language that will describe the many different qualities of silence and authenticity, of courage and love.

Silence answered us that evening. With it, we touched a memory that, for centuries, we met by the fire—not as managers, executives, employees, or consultants—but as storytellers, teachers, and enchanters. Our voices served as the light in the darkness. Our work is now, as it was then, through the simple pleasure of thinking and listening, to align ourselves with this flow of creative energy. In a world that is so much with us, it is important that our voices be clear. To this desire to be truly known by means of a language of *one's own*, we must once again make our appeal.

Notes

1. Please also see M. Jones and J. Shibley. "Practicing Relevance." in *The Dance of Change,* eds. P. Senge, A. Kleiner, C. Roberts, R. Ross, G. Roth, and B. Smith (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1999): 190; and M. Jones. "Work As a Vocation and Practice." *Leverage* (Waltham, MA: Pegasus Communications, March 2000, no. 39): 1.
2. Each of these steps on the journey deserves its own consideration and will be the subject of a coming essay.

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Commentary

by Lara L. Nuer and Shayne Hughes

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Michael Jones has raised his candle to the night sky, illuminating an uncertain but crucial path toward a more creative, caring space of human consciousness in which we are more than just linear thinkers focusing on results. In this space, we can search for resources hidden within us, expand our sense of the other, and deepen our ability to give to and "feel the moment." Jones seeks eloquently to jog our thinking on how we can more fully draw on our inner resources and human experience in those murky places in life that we have not figured out—to find clarity through centered perseverance.

Jones addresses the essence of the internal barriers confronting today's leaders. He declares the need for the forthright expression of doubts, vulnerabilities, questions, and concerns. Today's business world is plagued by a crop-threatening drought of real dialogue in which to share the core issues that fundamentally touch us. In reading articles, essays, and books, it is unclear what executives and managers on the front line of business can actually apply. How can they transform this figurative candle into a guiding practice that can help them every day? As a first step, we must search for our own personal barriers: our fears, our judgments, our unquestioned mental models. How do we project and perpetuate these into our environment, creating unsafe spaces that then justify our silence? What are our practical leverage points?

This question is a challenge to each of us to close the gap between intellectual clarity and practical application. T.S. Eliot once penned (1964):

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

What are the specific faces and nuances of our own shadow barriers? What blocks us, in the here and now, from taking that apparent leap from the cliff that is really only a step off a curb? Claire Nuer, a pioneer in the field of personal mastery and the founder of Learning as Leadership's[1] methodology, devoted her life to developing tools to illuminate these areas. If we cannot readily name, albeit with discomfort, what these shadow barriers are for ourselves, then we are squandering vast personal potential in the very areas that Jones is pointing us toward.

Another important point in this immense gray zone of leadership is feeling the moment. This primarily emotional discipline is extremely difficult for us because we have been taught to shove our emotions down. They need to be raised to the surface because they carry precious gems of information: intuition, perspective, concerns, reactions, and mental models. In learning to identify and to sort through these emotionally charged elements, we can learn to put them to the service of our endeavors, enhancing this "feel the moment" skill. As Jones indicates, our fear of performance is an additional barrier to this organic process; but when we do not acknowledge this ensemble of emotional tremblings, they drive our behavior and decision making without our knowledge. We have no choice but to grow in this direction.

Once again, there is the problem of application:

- How do we let the moment unfold without falling into chaos?
- How do we trust our perceptions without clinging to our righteousness?
- How do we bring our emotions to the surface without using them to override those of others?

The danger in this practice—and we saw it play itself out in the "self-emergence" movement a few years ago—is that it demands relinquishing control without relinquishing structure, and there is often a great confusion on this point. In our experience, our ability to "feel the moment" and spontaneously and creatively let something more powerful occur depends greatly on our level of preparation and structure. Is our platform so solid that we can leap off it into the unknown, trusting that we have the foundation to which to return? The difference between Jones's wonderful improvisational musings on the piano and the unpleasant noise one of us would make were we to try to play in his stead lies in decades of practice, discipline, and mastery. In a business context, this means meeting agendas, researched groundwork, thought-out processes—all so that we have the freedom, if we feel it in the moment, to let the magic of being human unfold.

Note

1. Through workshops and coaching, Learning as Leadership partners with companies, governmental agencies, universities, and individuals to help them implement their goals, accomplish large projects, and create sustainable change in their organizations and themselves.

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Story, Poetry, and Metaphor: Subjective Solutions for Subjective Problems

Annette Simmons

Despite a few weak smiles, the senior managers' faces displayed mostly anxiety or aggression. Their jaws tensed and released. The CEO shook my hand a little too hard. I stood before 33 post-merger survivors surrounding a U-shaped table. When the CEO introduced me as ''a young lady from North Carolina,'' I winced. This ''merger of equals'' was not going well. The CEO clearly saw the dilemma as ''us versus them'' and considered me (hired by the chairman of the board) one of ''them.'' His sabotage of the process had begun in earnest. Military metaphors like ''necessary losses'' and ''taking a bullet'' had placed lines of demarcation and created an impasse. I needed a story to create some gray in their black-and-white world.

> I want to tell you about my dog, Larry. Larry is a greyhound. I adopted him from the racetrack. You know, they kill the dogs that don't win, if no one adopts them. Larry didn't know how to be a pet when he came to live with me. He had never seen a bone before and chased it all over the backyard until he made the intellectual leap that if he'd hold it down with his paws, it would stay still. He has never learned—and shows no sign of learning—that when he is on the leash and he walks on one side of a telephone pole and I walk on the other, we aren't going anywhere. Larry just looks up at me with his puzzled dog face. You know, I could tell him all day to back up, but he's not going to back up until I back up. Once I back up, he follows. Only then, can we disentangle ourselves and move on.

There are a few smiles, nods, and some cut their eyes to meet others' across the room. One guy uncrossed his arms. They know I am *not* talking about my dog, Larry. Only a story could simultaneously address all positions. The Larry story connects to a universal human experience. It offers an opportunity for introspection about personal responsibility without pointing fingers. It gets their attention. And it might have earned me a few points for being a nice enough person to adopt a greyhound. I would even suggest that it offered a healing touch to hidden fear over the fate of those who don't win. Story and metaphor are powerful for anyone hoping to shift a group's perceptions quickly. I've told the Larry story dozens of times. Others have borrowed the story. It is a gem. Told well, a story can shoot past defenses and get to the heart of a matter. Better still, it can prompt introspection within the privacy of a listener's mind without risking public admission of error.

What is a story? It is a narration of a sequence of events that simulates a visual, sensory, and emotional *experience* that feels significant for both the listener and the teller.

If experience is the best teacher, then a story is second best. Bullet points on a PowerPoint screen are dead, inanimate representations of someone else's conclusions. A story has the power to breathe real-life experience into charts, tables, numerical analysis, and statistics so listeners can see, hear, and feel enough of an alternative perspective for it to become real. Once an idea or initiative feels real in their imagination, people are

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much more likely to do what it takes to make it real in the physical world. No matter how smart your conclusions seem to you, they are still yours, not theirs.

A really good story has the power to connect humans to their emotions and access deep, shared wisdom that lies beneath language.

Reporting *your* conclusions sets up an either-or situation that creates too much competitive tension. A story makes people think backward and then forward again through the experience of your story in a way that prompts their own new conclusions, which they will value much more highly than your conclusions. In addition, a really good story has the power to connect humans to their emotions and access deep, shared wisdom that lies beneath language. Many people are making bad decisions because they simply don't have the time to think deeply. A story is a way to create or reawaken ''common'' sense (that is, shared meaning that works).

Poetry

Perfectionists and idealists often turn to cynicism as a defense. Because these are usually the best and the brightest, releasing them from the tyranny of self-criticism also decreases cynicism. However, an objective description of the detrimental effects of self-limiting beliefs is, in equal parts, accurate and ineffective when compared to reading Mary Oliver's poem, ''Wild Geese'' (1992: 110).

> You do not have to walk on your knees
> For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting . . .

Poetry and story have the power to shine a light into dark places and shift the emotional receptivity of a group in a way that redirects the flow of their thoughts—in this case, away from old self-defeating loops toward new thinking that can lead to new solutions. Reading a poem is like listening to music that changes how we feel long enough to find a fresh perspective on a day that has been downhill since breakfast. Our perspective pops from seeing the old lady to seeing the young woman, the vase instead of two faces, or any of the other perspective-popping drawings you might remember. This flickering of perceptual perspective gives people new choices when they are stuck; it gives them access to their own creative intelligence and wisdom. It opens doors. Poetry is a tool that induces perceptual agility so people can begin to learn how to do it for themselves.

But How Do You *Sell* It?

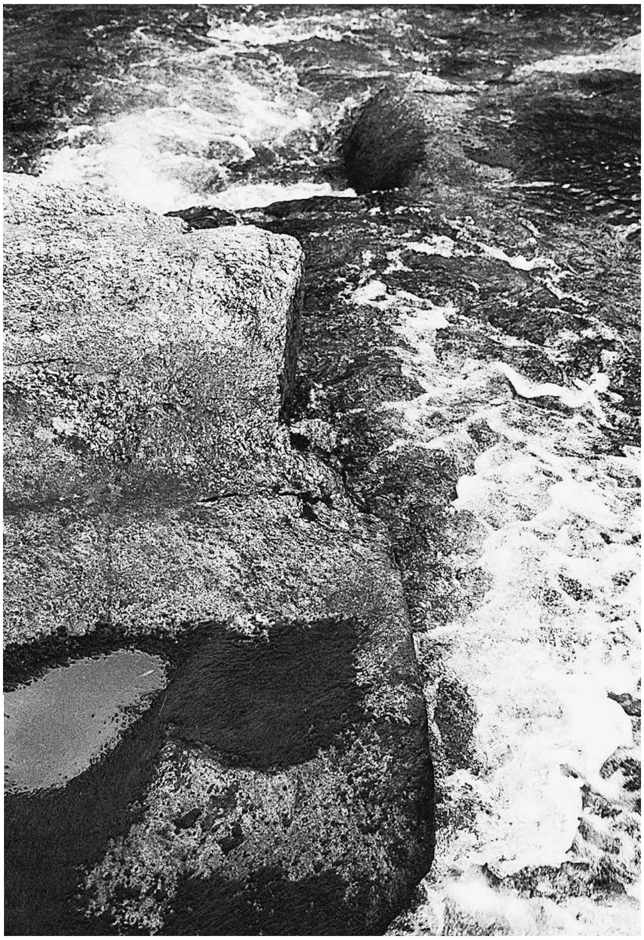
None of this sounds like the sure thing that a client wants you to promise before she shells out *x* amount of money and two days of her top performers' executive time. I can see a senior manager's brow furrow at ''perceptual agility'' or ''shifting the emotional state'' and imagine the theme music from ''The Twilight Zone'' playing in the background of his mind.

Reconnecting people to their wisdom or common sense is difficult to explain in objective terms. Articulating an agenda or defining outcomes for a highly subjective process is difficult when the client (or the client's boss) has not yet experienced (or still doesn't trust) the unpredictable nature of subjective solutions. The tyranny of agendas, objective measures, and outcomes has distorted our ability to do good work.

Objective criteria distract us from tending to the subjective aspects of organizational life. Recently, some federal judges, the clerk of court, and staff people held a dialogue to discuss the spotty implementation of their new IT system. Focus on implementation plans, ''accountability'' systems, and follow-up had failed to increase compliance. After getting permission to talk about subjective issues, they discussed, for almost *two hours*, who says hello in the morning. One particularly formal-looking judge (no one dared address her by her first name) burst out, ''Well, no one says hello to *me!*'' The shocked looks were testament to the fact that no one had dreamed that she cared. Was this dialogue relevant? Only when you interpret that saying hello in the morning was operating as a metaphor for ''respect'' in this group; the IT system had been held up by people who had decided they had no intention of cooperating with anyone who did not show them enough respect to say ''hello.'' After this dialogue, people started saying hello in the court hallways, and the implementation of the IT system proceeded much more smoothly.

Many groups suffer from untended subjective issues invisible to objective criteria and quantitative analysis. Objective, analytical methods make subjective truths disappear before they can be tended. This accounts for meetings at which a group talks for hours and never talks about the real problem.

It's not only problems that disappear with objective, quantifiable criteria, but many of the solutions too. Most of us think kittens are cute, right? But trying to produce *cute* as a measurable outcome is like cutting a kitten in half to examine the quantifiable inputs that create *cute*. In many cases, our analysis destroys the very thing we seek to understand. Subjective methodologies such as story, poetry, and metaphor cannot survive intact when subjugated to objective criteria or agendas. I sigh when corporate storytellers try to provide linear recipes by crafting outcome-based stories. The result is a bizarre, mechanical kitten that looks like a kitten, sounds like a kitten, costs a hell of a lot more than a real kitten, and falls way short of being either cute or engaging (although it never poops, you don't have to feed it, and you are guaranteed to get the same result every time). Stories that result from this 1, 2, 3 linear recipe approach are almost always boring and patronizing.



Objective versus Subjective Reality

Objective thinking routines introduce a terrible alchemy to subjective truths that transform gold into lead. I try to preempt these thinking routines with a model that protects subjective truths long enough for a group to tend to issues that need tending (see table 1). This model has accelerated both (1) permission to introduce story, metaphor, and dialogue, and (2) the transfer of story, metaphor, and dialogue skills. The model reduces defensiveness, builds credibility, and preempts the ''tried that, didn't work'' responses that high achievers sometimes place on this soft stuff. It takes about 10 minutes to deliver.

We already know that no matter how right a plan is by objective measures, if people don't accept it—if they simply don't *like* it at a subjective, emotional level—it's not going to succeed. We spend hours on cost-benefit analysis, information flow, and system architecture (doing real work) and come up with the perfect new compensation structure, but if people don't like it, it won't happen. The quality of the decision is dependent on the quality of the acceptance of that decision. We intuitively know subjective truths have a profound impact on our success. What we don't seem to know is what to do about it. Objective truths have been elevated over subjective truths for so long that we tend to label the time spent making the right decision as real work and the time spent on subjective issues as something less.

Tending to the soft stuff with objective tools built for real work is like carving coffee cups with a jackhammer.

Neglecting the soft stuff is bad enough, but tending to the soft stuff with objective tools built for real work is like carving coffee cups with a jackhammer. Or building a value-based organization by passing out laminated cards.

Lightening-fast mental routines embedded in us by a well-meaning educational system overrely on objective criteria to tell us what is true and what is false, to the extent that we inadvertently discard our natural-born understanding of vital subjective truths such as trust and loyalty. Because objective truth is either 100% true or it is false, after one failure, the entire principle is discarded. One jerk and some people never again trust

Table 1 Objective versus subjective reality

Objective reality	*Subjective reality*
Quality of decision—a decision or plan derived from objective facts, cost-benefit, documented need (real work)	Quality of acceptance—decision or plan people like and want to implement (soft stuff)
Things are either 100% true or they are false (test the hypothesis; if it fails, discard the hypothesis)	Nothing is 100% true or works 100% of the time; if a process works 50% to 70% of the time, that's as good as it gets
Scientific method and root cause analysis	Kittens (Cute $\neq$ 1/2 + 1/2)
Facts	Feelings
Leadership competencies—flexibility, consistency, decisiveness, inclusiveness	Real-leader stories (that is, flawed human beings who change their minds and at times make decisions without input)
Bullet points or charts	Metaphors, poetry, stories
Accuracy (derived from rational analysis)	Faith (often beyond rational evidence)
External proof (you can prove it is true)	Internal experience (you can't prove it; you just know it is true)

senior management. One betrayal and they never leave a subordinate's work unchecked. But subjective truths are subjective. Even when a subjective truth is true only 70% of the time (that is, ''employees left alone will do the best work they can''), it doesn't make it a half-truth. Consider the subjective strategies you use to create inspiration, courage, or integrity in your own life, for instance. There will be times when the theme to ''Rocky'' flares your nostrils and gives you energy, and there will be times when it makes you smirk. Trusting subjective truths that may let you down 30% to 50% of the time is better than discarding these truths and reverting to systems designed for worst-case scenarios.

Many a manager who has suffered the nightmare of facilitating a decision from a group that can't even agree on what to order for lunch has rejected the subjective truth that group input creates better decisions. She stops trusting that principle because, by objective standards, she ran an experiment and the principle failed. She decides that making the decision herself and *pretending* to get group input is a much better strategy. (If your mind is saying, ''Well, that just means she didn't have good consensus-building skills,'' let me say first, ''Duh!'' and second, ''This is exactly how inquiry and learning about subjective issues stop before they get started.'')

Because objective truth is either 100% true or it is false, after one failure, the entire principle is discarded.

Subjective issues are also resistant to our habit of looking for a root cause to the problem. Many groups reveal that lack of trust is a problem. Unfortunately, looking for the root cause of this particular issue invariably turns into a ''Whose fault is it?'' blame game that accelerates defensive reasoning. Counterintuitive as it may feel, examining root cause on trust issues will usually make things worse. Subjective problems respond much better to subjective tools and solutions.

Metaphor

Change what people see and feel, and their behavior will change accordingly. When lack of communication is the problem, it is safe to assume each individual is operating with an untold story about who or what contributes to this lack of communication. As long as these stories—founded on negative assumptions about people who don't care, are incompetent, or are overly self-interested—remain hidden, they are untouched by a more balanced, collective story.

Few senior managers will admit to their staff that they "feel alone and afraid," but a metaphor drawing of a ladder that's too short to get to the table and getting shorter due to the efforts of a group of stick figures with chain saws can express those feelings. The branch managers who assumed this senior manager was sucking up to the CEO instead of representing their interests can now see more than they saw before; the metaphor gives a glimpse into his inner experience. When you increase a group's ability to see their boss's internal struggle and positive intent, you will change the way they treat him, the effort they make to communicate with him, and the support they offer.

Metaphor has the potential to disable negative judgment and jumping to solutions long enough for individual perceptions to intermingle, cross-pollinate, and stretch to include a bigger picture.[1] The branch managers show their metaphor maps—a train with square wheels, a boot that threatens to crush their good intentions, and a road map that leads to a dead end. These negative, subjective feelings have had no other place for expression, so they festered. Once expressed, they lose their sting. They even become laughable. The sharing of metaphor maps usually gets a group laughing, a subjective source of healing and creativity that beats the hell out of any other intervention technique I've ever seen. Laughter is a solvent for negative emotions.

Getting a bunch of objective thinkers to draw metaphor pictures requires stealth. I hide the markers and the paper until we need them. Before resistance can build, I present sample metaphor maps, explain the task, and give people five minutes to draw a metaphor of the current dynamics of their group or organization. As hidden beliefs about the futility of communication or cooperation are revealed, they are simultaneously reframed by seeing others' hidden beliefs. Sure, only 50% to 70% of the maps provide insight, but in a group of 10 or 40, that is a *lot* of insight.

Insight pops at several points. Sometimes, it happens when a person looks at his or her own map (a long line of new hires being sucked up into the whirling organizational tornado, with bodies flung all over, some out the top). Sometimes, it happens by seeing others' maps (bailing out a sinking boat). And sometimes, it occurs in the conversation that follows ("I just got back from the Gulf War, and if I'm not drinking powdered milk and I can kiss my kids goodnight, this ain't that bad"). Ultimately, each individual's metaphor enters the collective memory of the group *unabridged* and begins to create an opportunity for a new group metaphor to emerge. Conflicting truths that cannot be reconciled in a true-false framework reconcile more easily within the "two sides of a coin" framework of metaphor.

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Objective criteria force us to choose sides on issues such as whether last year's performance was good or bad. Metaphors allow the complexity of "it depends on how you look at it" to be expressed. It may have been a good year financially, but all the dead bodies tell another story. You can feel the pop of recognition that occurs when people begin to understand that they each have a different piece of the same damn picture. They don't actually disagree; they were just using different definitions of good.

Businesspeople trained to deliver a problem description via objective language lose the subjective content. If a manager describes the last reorganization as demonstrating a lack of communication, when she really means, "I feel like I'm being treated like a rat in a cage," we lose the ability to tend to the real problem. We need tools to reveal the subjective issues behind rational descriptions. Argyris's "left-hand column" exercise promises access to the unspoken, but, in practice, this wonderful tool doesn't work as fast or as effectively as metaphor (1990). Smart executives mangle the intent and manufacture lightening-fast resistance to the awareness the left-hand column offers. We need tools that reveal the subconscious before the conscious has a chance to disable it with logic. We need tools that help us laugh at ourselves and give us permission to stop pretending that we are something we are not.

Conclusion

Recently, a group of PhD physicists and engineers took the objective-subjective truth model further than I expected: "You realize that quantum physics moves even objective reality over to the subjective side, don't you?" I said, "Yeah, but that is a little too scary, don't you think?" We just both smiled and moved on.

It's all in how you look at it.

Note

1. For metaphor map drawings and further guidance on facilitating the process, see www.groupprocessconsulting.com.

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Commentary

by Judy Sorum Brown

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Annette Simmons helped me better understand some of my own experiences with leaders, with groups, and as a poet. As she suggests, an overreliance on analytical methodologies causes certain persistent and important problems to disappear from the organizational radar screen.

Perhaps the dynamic of the analytical approach making invisible certain central subjective realities suggests why people find it hard to settle into dialogue and storytelling. Even when they think storytelling might be a path to deeper understanding, in comparison with the familiar and active analytic approach, the subjective approach leaves people feeling as if nothing is getting done. Perhaps people can't stand the feeling, invoked by being with an image of complex reality, that nothing is being "fixed." They pop themselves out of the subjective mode and back into the analytical.

Simmons suggests ways that the subjective analysis of subjective reality opens important pathways to understanding. I think I've intuitively understood this, as perhaps have many practitioners (and that's perhaps why dialogue, language, poetry, and the creative processes have found their way to the heart of my practice and that of many colleagues). But Simmons's description of this dynamic gives me a clearer way of holding what I've intuitively known and enables me to communicate my understanding in more straightforward ways.

She also suggests something about the enduring power of a good story: her story about Larry the dog is powerful, I suspect, because given its multiple nuances, shadings, and meanings, it remains powerful for her. Michael Jones, the Canadian composer and pianist, and I have mused often about the persistent power of certain stories, such as that of the man who asked him, "If you don't play your compositions, who in the universe will?" This story continues to have power because the storyteller, Jones, is still learning from the story. Thus, a story functions most powerfully as inquiry, as offering, rather than as lesson. The process is akin to sitting beside someone who is telling the story around a campfire as we listen in the dark.

Stories and images of all kinds, including poetry, let us consider something in the privacy of our hearts and spirits, without the pressure to be accountable or decide. And we are able to place that story next to our own story for consideration. Sometimes, by some mystery, from that consideration comes a natural shift of understanding that creates a new, healthier perception. That perception cannot be forced but is wholly invitational, voluntary, personal, and inner.

Simmons suggests how an image or a story can become what educator and author Parker Palmer calls "the third thing" in our midst, something we can all look at and from which we can weave a rich set of meanings in dialogue with our colleagues (1998). It creates a fuller, richer conversation about things that matter and a fresh territory for exploration and self-disclosure.

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Commentary

by Ipek Kursat

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Story, poetry, and metaphor are lost territories in Western culture. Annette Simmons reclaims a good deal of the ground with admirable lucidity. As she points out, our overreliance on objectivity has displaced the subjective, and tools that evoke the subjective, as a legitimate part of our experience: if you call something a "fairy tale" or remark that someone is telling you a good story, you have delivered an insult. Many of us are cautiously stepping forward to reclaim our subjective experience as legitimate. However, we tend to be careful to sidestep the dreaded "touch-feely" label.

When I read Simmons's claim that objective tools are inherently limited, though, I wonder if we are moving toward the other side of an either-or paradigm, when we should be looking for ways to include more of our experience as thinking, feeling, sensing, and knowing creatures. Our subjective, intuitive capacity and our rational, objective side are complementary. The former deepens. The latter allows outlines to emerge from the depths. I agree that a root-cause analysis on trust issues is a bad idea, but I have used the tool to reflect on stories that my coaching clients and I live out repeatedly in our lives. I might ask, for example, "If this pattern that I keep encountering were branches on a tree, what story or map of reality would be its trunk? What core beliefs constitute the roots that support the trunk?" This is one example of the way we can blend the objective and the metaphoric to focus reflection and facilitate transition to action.

The issue of results is another point on which I may hold a different perspective. As a consultant, my primary responsibility is the outer world: Is there a positive business impact from my work? Are people acting differently ? Are they more effective? I do reflective practice because I expect to see a difference in the way I live as a result. When I show up as a consultant, what differences does my client want to see? As Simmons suggests, direct, positive impacts from subjective methods are difficult to measure. But what we need to measure are, ultimately, business and performance impacts. We could, for example, hypothesize that teams that use nonrational tools such as story and metaphor to diagnose problems are more productive over the course of the project than teams that do not. We can then develop and track measures of productivity, inquire into organizational factors that enhance or dampen the "story effect," and so on. Simmons herself does that in her story about IT implementation, albeit informally and after the fact.

Finally, I hope I can shed a bit more light on what makes a real, live, cuddly kitten and a mechanical "Frankencat." For several years, I studied with Paula Underwood, an Iroquois Keeper of Old Things, who taught me about the anatomy of a learning story. A traditional learning story—

one that belongs to a community and is designed and passed on from generation to generation—has rather specific elements. These are the circle, the triangle, cadence, and an open loop for continuing inquiry. An example is this opening from "Who Speaks for Wolf," a learning story from Underwood's tradition.

> Almost at the edge of the circle of light cast by Central Fire, Wolf was standing. His eyes reflected the fire's warmth with a colder light. Wolf stood there, staring at the fire. A boy of eight winters was watching Wolf, as immobile as Wolf, as fascinated. Finally, the boy turned to Grandfather, warming his old bones from winter's first chill.

The story begins with a circle of light and the triangle of Wolf, the boy, and Grandfather. Wolf stands almost at the edge of the circle of light, an image that hints at hidden things beyond in the night, inviting our imagination to expand the circle. We also learn something about each character that makes him individual. Wolf's eyes reflect the fire's warmth with a colder light. The boy is eight. Grandfather is feeling winter's chill in his old bones. The triangle creates a strong foundation for the story, enabling us to explore the circle and what lies beyond.

"Who Speaks for Wolf" continues with Grandfather telling the story of the relationship between the tribe and Wolf. He tells the boy how the human community decided to seek a new home in the forest without considering their impact on Wolf, how the relationship deteriorated, and how they eventually learned to consider all perspectives before they tried a new course of action. "Who Speaks for Wolf" ends with a description of the way a decision-making council would close:

> Until at last someone would rise
> and ask the old, old question
> to remind us of things
> we do not yet see clearly enough to remember.
> Tell me now my brothers. Tell me now my sisters:
> Who speaks . . . for Wolf?

The story ends with a question. By not telling us what we need to do or what we are supposed to learn, it leaves an open loop through which insight and reflection might slip each time we hear it. We might notice the cadences of its language, a rhythm created by phrase repetitions that rocks us into a receptive state.

Simmons's story about Larry has many of these anatomical characteristics, which help make it a real, live, cuddly kitten. As we create our own tradition of learning stories and other metaphoric tools for inquiry, we have the gifts of other cultures, as well as the wholeness of our human experience from which to draw.

Jennie Butchart's Sunken Garden

VIEW

Scott Thompson

We stand for a time in her vision,
surrounded by green dark cliffs of cascading ivy
and the lighter green spray of ferns
and wavering threads of falling water.
We wander along dreambeds
where Gooseneck Loosestrife
suspends her spilling snowflakes
and Bearded Tongue displays pink and white coronets,
while the lemon-yellow horns of Angel's Trumpets bow
and Angel's Fishing Rod dangles magenta lures.
Here we see the scarlet-dotted orange orbs
of Scotsman's Purse and the clustered
lavender bells of Grape Hyacinth.
And we cannot completely believe
that this silent eruption
of cultivated magic
began in the gray-clay waste
of a limestone-emptied quarry.

Reflection

If you have ever doubted the transforming power of vision, pay a visit to the Butchart Gardens of Vancouver Island and doubt no more. In 1908, when cement industrialist Robert Pim Butchart had emptied a large quarry of its limestone and clay, his wife Jennie went to work in the place, a vast and desolate cubic hole in their property. More than a decade later, the waste place had been transformed into the Sunken Garden, a stunning and enchanted spot that draws and inspires thousand of visitors daily. The acres surrounding the Sunken Garden were also cultivated into exquisite gardens, including a Japanese Garden, a Rose Garden, and an Italian Garden. The entire place oozes with magic, but I was most in awe of the Sunken Garden simply because it began as an emptied quarry and had been utterly, powerfully transformed. Jennie Butchart died in 1950, but through the instantiation of her vision, she is daily and deeply reaching the souls of thousands.

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This story, of course, is not solely about vision. It is also about passion, perseverance, and the interplay of vision and personal mastery. Jennie Butchart had not been much of a gardener before 1908, but in pursuit of her vision, she became a master gardener and the creator of a patch of earth like no other.

Acknowledgment

I have exercised poetic license in writing my poem. Although all the plants I mention are found at Butchart Gardens, not all are within the Sunken Garden. I felt that this particular combination of names and the images they evoke helped me better to convey the wonder of the experience. Do I feel any guilt? Nah! Poets great and small have been doing it for centuries.

The Four Elements of Every Successful Story

Robert Dickman

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At the center of every culture is a group of people seated around a fire telling tales of the heroes whose struggles transformed and remade their world. That's true whether the fire is the burning embers of a cooking fire in the Amazon basin or the flickering pixels of a cathode ray tube in upper Manhattan. It's true whether the hero is White Buffalo Calf Woman, whose gift of the sacred pipe gave birth to the Sioux nation, or Neal Armstrong, whose view of the world from the moon ushered in an era of globalization. These stories do more than define a culture; they shape and move it, making it a living thing. As author Daniel Quinn has said, ''The carrier of culture is the story we tell ourselves over and over''(1995).

As human beings, we communicate primarily through the telling of stories. We are bombarded by hundreds of stories each day—stories about which toothpaste is best, about terrorists lurking in the shadows, about new scientific miracles and eternal spiritual truths. We hear so many stories that it is hard to study story as story itself. We are like fish trying to see water. What we need is a good definition of what a story is.

The definition I find best is: *A story is a fact wrapped in an emotion that can compel us to take action and so transform the world around us.*

This definition holds true as far back in the study of story as we can go. Jerome Bruner, the father of cognitive psychology, believes that storytelling is hardwired into our psyches. Bruner has observed that, from an early age, children tell stories. First are the stories of completion. The young child says (by means of gesture and facial expression), ''All gone,'' when the bottle is empty. The child says, ''Uh oh,'' when she feels she has made a mistake and, ''Ohh!'' when surprised or pleased.

These stories are short but complete. And they meet our definition. Take ''all gone.'' The fact is that the bottle is finished. This fact is wrapped in an emotion, either satisfaction or desire for more. Depending on which emotion it is, an adult is compelled to take an action—either to burp the baby and settle her down, or to get another bottle. Either way, the baby's world is transformed for the better. Bruner asserts that infants develop meaning through narrative, and that the need to create stories precedes language. He suggests that infants are motivated to learn to speak precisely because they already have stories inside them that they want to share with others (Bruner, 1990).

Not all stories end happily. Living in Germany in the aftermath of World War I was frightening and brutal. Hitler wrapped that fact in the powerful emotions of paranoia and anti-Semitism. How powerfully he conveyed those emotions can be seen in the surviving films of his speeches. The story he told—that the Jews were responsible—compelled the German people to take actions that transformed the world into a living hell. Though storytelling is innate in human beings, it is a value-free process. Story as story is neutral. As corporate executives, scientists, and academics committed to moving our culture toward the common good, we must understand how to use the incredible power of story to communicate sometimes unpleasant but important facts, such as global warming or income disparities, in human terms, so that our culture takes actions to change our world for the better.

What makes a good story? What makes a story great? Why do some stories have a life of only a few news cycles, while others come to dominate our cultural debate? What gives a story staying power at the box office or in the boss's office? Having spent my professional life intimately involved with stories as an actor, communications coach, and corporate consultant in intracorporate communication and branding, I have come to observe that all successful stories have four basic components.

To make them easy to remember I call these components PHAT: passion, hero, antagonist, and transformation. These components lie within any story, whether a movie, a business presentation, or a political debate. When these components are understood and used effectively, stories speak to our basic human condition and needs. Because these narrative needs are hardwired into us almost from birth, stories written 5,000 years ago in languages long dead can still speak to us.

Before we go further, we should return to the very basics.

Pythagoras was probably the first great systems thinker in our Western culture. But because none of his writing is available in its original form, our study of story components begins with his student, the philosopher and poet Empedocles. From Empedocles, we first get the concept of the world made up of four elements: fire, earth, air, and water. Until recently, conventional wisdom viewed Empedocles as a natural philosopher—in essence a proto-scientist—primarily trying to describe the material world. More recent scholarship (by Hadot, 2002; Kingsley, 1995; and others) has shown that the four elements of Empedocles were not solely material but also described inner psychological states. Empedocles attributed divinity to these elements because he saw them as partaking of the eternal nature of consciousness itself and called them ''the four roots'' because he saw them as the basis of life.

In that archetypal psychological sense, Empedocles's elements relate to our understanding of story. Those interested in pursuing this view of the pre-Socratics are referred to the more recent works of philosopher Oscar Ichazo (available online at arica.org).

How do the archetypal elements of Empedocles relate to the narrative elements of PHAT? Since story is the carrier of culture, and Empedocles's elements lie at the core of ours, it is not surprising that there is a direct correlation. Using the elements as an anchor allows us to deal with story structure in a less linear fashion.

Once again, the key I use is PHAT: passion, hero, antagonist, and transformation.

Passion

Every powerful narrative has passion, the emotion that is wrapped around our story's central fact. This corresponds to Empedocles's fire—passion that ignites the story in the heart of the audience. When an audience first comes to a story, it is far from being a unified body. It is composed of separate individuals with differing needs, desires, and distractions.

Theater people often call a new or difficult audience ''cold.'' They understand that the audience must be ''warmed up'' before it can absorb new material.

Passion is the fire that attracts the audience's attention and draws it into the story. It makes us want to hear more. Passion is the sword that cuts away the excess baggage of past thought and images and calls our attention to the present. It unifies us as an audience. And in that unity, which both transcends our self and reinforces it, there is tremendous strength. We turn on the TV every night even when there is nothing really good on, just to be part of the story.

Passion is the fire that attracts the audience's attention and draws it into the story.

Every significant social and political movement must have passion to exist. In my workshops, I often ask people to describe the most powerful public event they ever attended. A few years ago, a friend described being at the August 1963 peaceful civil rights march on Washington and hearing Martin Luther King's famous ''I Have a Dream'' speech. If you have a moment, you might want to read that speech again. It is storytelling at its absolute finest. My friend recalled that as she stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial in a crowd of more than one million people, the passionate heartfelt words and images of King's story washed over her, and all the people around her seemed to disappear. ''It was as if he were talking directly to me,'' she said.

That is what passion does. It makes the story personal. It makes us care.

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Hero

All the passion in the world won't do any good unless you have someplace to put it. That is where the hero comes in. The hero relates to Empedocles's element of earth. It is the way the story is grounded in our reality. By hero, I don't mean Superman or a grandmother who rushes into a burning building to save a baby, though these are examples of heroes, but the character in the story who gives the audience a point of view.

This point of view needs to be substantial enough that the story has "a leg to stand on," but of a scale that allows us to identify with it. The hero is both our surrogate and our guide through the narrative. The hero's vision of the world creates the landscape the audience enters.

For the audience to identify with the hero's point of view, they must feel a little piece of themselves in the hero's situation, so part of the hero's function is to create a sense of equality with the audience. If the hero is too perfect, the audience rapidly loses interest. Good stories have heroes who are human and authentic.

Whatever you think of Ronald Reagan's politics, he was a great storyteller. He knew the importance of heroes in creating a political consensus. He understood that with the right hero, people would see even dry and technical facts from a personal viewpoint. During his State of the Union addresses, when he got to a point that might be abstract or an issue that might be divisive, he would point up to the Congressional Gallery and there, posed and waiting, was an "American Hero" who personified the point Reagan was trying to make. Reagan controlled the national debate by using heroes to define the territory it would cover.

If the hero is too perfect, the audience rapidly loses interest.

One of the most important characteristics of the hero is that without him or her there can be no action. In David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia,* there is a wonderful scene in which Prince Feisal (played by Alec Guinness) asks an American reporter why he has come all the way to the Arabian Desert. The reporter replies that he believes it is time for America to become involved in the war against Germany, and it is his job to make a hero out of Lawrence. The reporter knew America would take action only if the issue had a human face.

Antagonist

For a story, problems are like air. They breathe life into the narrative. If no obstacles appear, the audience views the story as flat. It's seen merely as propaganda or a public relations puff piece. Dealing with the antagonist creates an atmosphere, which makes the story interesting and credible. In fact, the antagonist is the first thing we think of when we think of a story.

The Dalai Lama says, ''Each one of us has an innate desire to seek happiness and overcome suffering'' (1998: 34). Great stories mirror this reality. Seeking happiness is the motivation. Overcoming suffering is doing battle with the antagonist. Instinctively, humans are interested in how others deal with their problems. Funneling this curiosity into the narrative deepens the audience's attention and drives the story forward.

A great problem, often personified as an identifiable villain, crystallizes the facts of the story and helps them come alive. A powerful antagonist is central to most great stories and gives the action of the hero (and by extension, the audience) direction and focus. It is very hard to find that focus without a good villain. Two-time Academy Award winner William Goldman says that every screenplay has to answer just three questions: ''Who is your hero? What does he want? Who the hell is keeping him from getting it?''(1986).

The purpose of the antagonist is not to create conflict, but to help clarify it.

The creative potential of the antagonist to inspire action can be seen in the still-unfolding Enron scandal. At first, the Enron story is just a set of facts. It's the largest bankruptcy in corporate history, but not all that different from other enormous financial disasters, and as such restricted to the business sections of your local paper. The press gives us a point of view by discovering the story's heroes, all the hard-working Enron employees who, through no fault of their own, are having their life savings wiped out. But we still don't know what to do about it.

What action should we take? That becomes clear only when the villain comes on stage in the form of Kenneth Lay, the man who not only destroyed the heroes' wealth, but made a pretty penny doing it. Suddenly, we can take action. A bill to promote corporate responsibility passes Congress and things change. How much they will change is another story. The point is that, without an antagonist, our actions might have remained unfocused and unproductive.

Of course, there is a moral danger in creating an antagonist. We don't want to demonize our opponents. So it is important to remember that the purpose of the antagonist is not to create conflict, but to help clarify it.

Lockheed's ''Skunk Works'' is one of the world's premier aircraft design firms. It has developed many of the finest US military aircraft over the past 60 years. Its slogan is,

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''It takes a great enemy to make a great airplane.'' What Skunk Works understands is that in a good corporate story (and it is the corporate story that defines the corporate culture), conflict or struggle with an enemy is far from destructive. It can create a positive atmosphere for innovation by making it important to maximize effort. It helps unify the team to move forward toward a common goal. What makes the story positive or negative is the nature of that goal.

Transformation

Transformation is the natural result of a well-told story. Our heroes take action to overcome their problems, and they and the world around them are changed. The element that relates to transformation is, of course, water. Water is the most transformable of all the elements. Place it in a container, and it conforms to that new shape. Though it is soft to the touch, it can also cut through limestone and granite, carving rivers and valleys into the landscape. It is in the waters of the ocean that the greatest transformation of all first occurred, the miracle of life.

The audience feels satisfied when they see the hero emerge from the fires of hell a changed and better human being. Learning from the negative and moving on toward the good gives us all hope. Achilles begins *The Iliad* in a snit, refusing his duties to his comrades in arms, but ends the story defeating his enemy Hector and honoring his fallen foe in death. Hamlet dithers in a world of moral ambiguity, but in the end takes actions that remove a great evil from the heart of his kingdom. Luke Skywalker accepts the reality of The Force and gives the republic new hope.

These stories don't have to have a happy ending. The last scene of Hamlet is hardly a laugh riot. But they do all follow a common arc. We want our heroes to break from the bondage of their past and generate a more vital future. When the hero moves from selfish to selfless, this mirrors the hidden potential in each of us. We embrace those stories and make them our own.

We want our heroes to break from the bondage of their past and generate a more vital future.

After emerging from a long prison confinement, Nelson Mandela expressed no bitterness or hatred toward his captors. Instead, he exuded wisdom and compassion, and that began to move South Africa away from its bloody past. The very forces that had tried for so long to destroy him had transformed Mandela. The whole world could understand his story. How could they not? Joseph Campbell has said, ''When we stop thinking primarily of ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness'' (1948).

Using the Four Elements

Once the four elemental components of the PHAT model are understood, their use in the analysis of story is relatively straightforward. If you want to know whether a story you plan to use in a political or media campaign will be successful, you should ask four questions:

1. Passion. Does the story contain sufficient passion to engage the emotions of its target audience? Are the stakes high enough? The emotions of a story act as its primary anchor in memory and its motivation to action (which could be at the point of purchase or in the ballot box).
2. Hero. Does the story provide a clearly defined point of view? Can the facts that lie at its core be understood? Can this point of view be comfortably accepted by the target audience?
3. Antagonist. Are the obstacles that confront the hero of the story (and by extension, the audience) expressed clearly so that the actions needed to overcome those obstacles are understood and the challenge of taking such actions fully accepted?
4. Transformation. Does the story have the power to change the life of the audience in a meaningful way, and is that transformation positive?

If the answer to these four questions is *yes,* then the story is likely to be successful. If not, then it won't be.

If your story is weaker in one area than in another, then work on the weak element. For example, you feel very powerful emotions about the scientific facts underlying global warming, and you know who the bad guys are (we all do know, don't we), but you're not able to provide the audience with a point of view that allows them to feel comfortable accepting those facts. As a result, they find your story, well, science fiction. What your story needs is a good hero. A hero your audience can relate to and accept as authentic and whose problems mirror their own. It shouldn't be hard to find one. There are plenty of heroes out there, and once your story has a good one, it will be grounded in the experience of your audience and easily accepted and understood.

Or let's say you are giving a presentation to an interdepartmental meeting within your corporation. You've carefully marshaled your facts so each department can see what relates to its particular interests. You've laid out the steps needed to overcome the obstacles ahead. There is no doubt the overall result will be a positive transformation.

But you finish speaking and notice a distinct lack of interest in your audience. You think you may have even seen your boss stifle a yawn. Your problem may be that you haven't connected your passion to your presentation.

Remember, according to our definition of story, it is emotion that makes facts compel people to take action. You need to ask yourself why you care about the project you are suggesting. What feelings does it bring up? If you find your own emotional anchor to the project—why you *want* to suggest it—and can be open and honest about those feelings without histrionics, that passion will transmit to your audience. At the very least, it will provoke a heated discussion of the topic. With passion, your presentation will fire your audience up, and that beats cold stares anytime.

Of course, storytelling is an art, and no one element of the PHAT paradigm can ever be considered in total isolation. For example, you might have problems connecting to the passion of a story because you really don't feel comfortable with the transformation it produces. Analyzing problems in corporate communication requires subtlety and experience, but the PHAT model and its grounding in the four elements of Empedocles is an excellent place to begin.

Because human beings have an innate ability to take in information and organize it in narrative form, and because shared stories are at the core of every culture, the key to changing a corporate culture lies in eliciting, understanding, and clarifying the stories on which it is based.

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Commentary

by Beth Jandernoa

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As I read Robert Dickman's article, I remembered an experience I had when the power of storytelling brought a group of disparate individuals together. I and some fellow SoL consultants were helping to launch a cross-level, cross-organizational team on a yearlong project to reinvent strategy for a global Fortune 500 company. We had gathered a group of 25 of the "best" young thinkers in the company from every continent. The group faced a formidable task, and we knew that having them gel into a team early on was critical to the project's success.

After a few days of orientation, we were struck by the strong sense of individuality and the disjointed feel of the group. After all, these were the stars of the company, and they had learned to succeed by being seen as having the best ideas. We needed to find a way to turn the energy of individuality into a collective force. So, on the third evening, we decided to gather the group into a circle and invite each person to tell a story of the significant experiences that had shaped their lives and brought them to where they were. We decided to risk boredom and the possibility that it could make things even worse.

As people told their stories, we noticed that they began to come alive and become real to each of us. The turning point came when the secretary who had been assigned to assist the group described her poor and tragic childhood and her triumph over great adversity. She had lost her parents at an early age and was not able to go through school in the traditional sense. She had started as a mail sorter and educated herself at night. She was now the secretary to the chief operations officer of the company. Her story lifted the group's spirit and unleashed a feeling that we could overcome any obstacles we faced together. As the stories continued, we began to feel the partnership of beginning on a long, arduous journey together. By the end of that night, there was a shared commitment to something larger than all of us and a gratitude for the commonality of spirit among us.

The elements about which Dickman writes—passion, hero, antagonist, and transformation—in this secretary's story transformed the group from being competitive individuals to a cohesive team.

Commentary

by Michael Sales

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Leaders shape culture and tell the organization what its story is. Leaders are heroes whose metaphors and narratives turn everyday routines into inspiring struggles. In my work as a consultant and coach, I've seen many people overlook what could have been defining moments, both for them individually and for their organizations, by not taking advantage of an opportunity to tell a great story:

- The dean of a leading college has an enormous amount of data about why the school is such a spectacular institution, but bores his listeners to tears with an endless chronology of facts.
- A judge sentences a defendant according to the letter of the law, rather than connecting the decision to norms of principled behavior in a way that reinforces society's moral code.
- A female manager with a deep understanding of an organization's core dynamics chronically defers speechifying to men who don't have her insight because she is nervous in front of a crowd of high-powered men.

All these people need to learn how to "wrap fact in emotion" to mobilize the others. Compare their limitations with John Kennedy's inaugural address or almost anything Franklin Roosevelt or Winston Churchill ever said in public. I once heard Richard Burton reading names, addresses, and numbers from the phone book. He delivered these lines with infinitely more pathos than the multitude of professors and executives, whose endless droning demonstrates the shallowness of their connection to their audiences.

As a student of power and leadership, I appreciate Dickman's value-neutral stance toward "story as story"; that is, we don't have to agree with the storyteller's views to recognize when they are mobilizing others to act. As I write, for example, George W. Bush is doing a pretty good job of demonizing Saddam Hussein: "You know, he tried to kill my dad." I think that painting good and evil versions of the world is the antithesis of systems thinking, but—at least for the moment—the president, like Reagan before him, is weaving a powerful, simple story using this approach. We don't have to like the story for it to work. As Berger and Luckmann argue forcefully, "Create the frame and own the game" (1972). In fact, Dickman's cautionary tale about Hitler's persuasiveness as a storyteller reminds me of the American Civil Liberties Union's dictum: "The answer to speech that offends us is better speech."

While we become extraordinarily acclimated to the "given" story that constitutes reality, isn't it true that the "definition of the situation" (as Argyris and Schön might say [1978]) is really up for grabs? At any moment, an Arthurian figure might step forward and completely redefine the accepted state of being.

Revealing my age (and more), I can vividly remember Mario Savio jumping on top of a car at the height of a demonstration for freedom of speech at Berkeley in 1964, grabbing a megaphone, and exclaiming, "We are human beings! Do not bend, fold, or mutilate!" Much of what has become the history of modern student rights began at that moment. Before Savio told his simple, eloquent story, students were more seen than heard. A "hero," in Dickman's terminology, seized the instant and fired an idea that was heard around the world.

At every moment of human history, there have been passionate men and women who told stories of struggle and transformation. Perhaps Dickman's deceptively simple rules of narration will cause more good ideas and energy to break through in all sorts of social systems.

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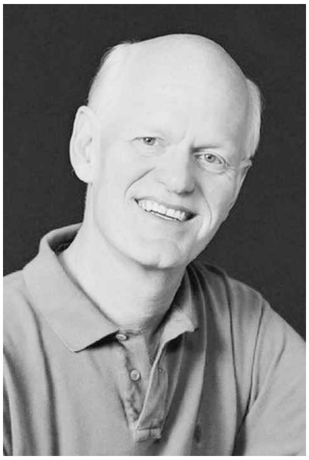
Commentary

by Marshall Goldsmith



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Robert Dickman's concept of story is useful for understanding what makes organizational communication meaningful and important. Too many leaders (especially those with technical backgrounds) get lost in the content of what they are saying. They think that if the appropriate facts are communicated, their job is done. Without the four key components of the story, facts can seem dry and lifeless. E-mails seldom spur anyone on to bigger and better things. The leader's role is not just to communicate, but to inspire. Great stories can help create the inspiration and commitment required for successfully executing strategy.

I spend a great deal of my time coaching executives. The four story elements are useful for understanding why some leaders achieve long-term change in behavior, while others do not. When leaders demonstrate a passion for personal change, realize that they are both the hero and the antagonist in their struggle for transformation, and involve their coworkers in their ongoing story, they always improve. When they leave out any of the key elements, they seldom achieve positive, long-term change.

I would suggest one more layer for building on this concept. Everyone in the organization needs to write his or her own story of personal change and growth. We all need to understand how we fit in the larger story of the organization and how we can demonstrate passion and be the hero of our own drama. We need to understand our own antagonists (both internal and external). In order to succeed in a changing world, we all must continually strive for our own transformation. By involving all employees in creating the organizational story, we can make happy endings a function of *us,* not *them.*

Learning to Anneal: An Interview with Vic Leo

George L. Roth

As manager for executive development, Vic Leo was central to the efforts that brought systems thinking and organizational learning concepts to Ford Motor Company. After 33 years of service to Ford, Leo retired at the beginning of 2000. He recently reflected on corporate learning and systems initiatives at Ford—how they started, what they achieved, where they were effective, and what they may have lacked.

The insights from Leo's efforts to create more effective organizational practices go well beyond specific conditions at Ford. They were set in the broader context of American management practices and embedded in an MIT research-center-sponsored consortium of leading companies. These companies all applied organizational learning techniques, shared their results, and sought to learn from each other's efforts. The efforts at Ford, like other large corporations, were not abstract, isolated initiatives, but programs undertaken to improve performance and to better align with changing technological opportunities, consumer preferences, and new competition.

Since his retirement from Ford, Leo has focused on developing his skills in a new activity—glassblowing. As an avid collector of museum-quality glass for many years, Leo is now learning to produce this art form. Here he reflects on his new avocation and its lessons for organizational learning and change efforts. One stage of glassblowing, annealing, strengthens and hardens the glass, whereas learning implies flexibility and fluidity in doing something new and different. In this context, anneal is something that we do to strengthen our positions after learning and changes have taken place. In the practice of glassblowing, a creation is unstable if it is not annealed. Might organizations and their people also be more effective if learning and change programs included annealing?

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Roots of Systems Thinking at Ford

In 1985, Ford started a series of executive development meetings in which its top managers from different offices and functions gathered for a weeklong program in mixed groups of 50. The program created a ''global village,'' bringing together the company's leadership to discuss the agenda of then-Chairman Don Peterson and Ford's policy and strategy committee.

Leo joined the executive development center at the end of the initial program to create a successive program. Instead of repeating the program with the strategic issues handed down from the policy and strategy committee, Leo interviewed 200 executives to understand what *they* wanted to learn. Interviewing had its detractors; after all, it was countercultural in a business that was then top-down and design driven. Three themes emerged from the interviews: globalization and operating in world markets, leadership to bring about globalization, and thinking differently. Leo commented:

> The third theme was a fuzzy one, but it was articulated consistently. Executives would grapple with a problem, make progress, and then run into a wall. With the world moving so fast, they'd ask, ''Isn't there a way to break through these problems, a different way of thinking about them?''

Leo and others at Ford looked at various writings and research that addressed *thinking*. They chose Russell Ackoff and his research on the new industrial revolution and Peter Senge and his work on systems dynamics. Both Ackoff and Senge were systems theorists, developing approaches to conceptualize business issues in terms of operating and thinking systemically. Both were asked to be instructors for the next executive development program. The focus of the program, which all Ford executives attended between 1987 and 1990, was globalization, leadership, and thinking systemically. Leo remarked:

Might organizations and their people also be more effective if learning and change programs included annealing?

> The systems thinking module, done by either Ackoff or Senge, received very high marks, probably 9.5 on a scale of 1 to 10. The concepts were honest, straightforward, and engaging. But executives said in their evaluations, ''I don't see what I would do differently on Monday morning.'' It was the same, class after class, session after session, to the point where I could write their evaluations. Several times, they challenged me directly: ''Vic, if you could show us what application looks like, it would really be something.'' That issue served as a mandate for my remaining years at Ford.

Learning from Projects

A natural way to address the issue was to undertake projects that applied systems thinking concepts. The idea of a project was easy to conceptualize, but much harder to bring into practice. Over time, four projects emerged—a vehicle development team,[1] a manufacturing plant (Woodhaven Stamping Plant), a components plant (Electronic Fuel Handling Division), and a staff group (Occupational Health and Safety).

The projects helped teams use the ideas of thinking systemically to be more effective. The researchers' care, attention, and good work fostered significant learning and demonstrated the effectiveness of systems ideas. The results of the projects were outstanding. The product development team produced a fine vehicle, reduced the rework, and returned almost $100 million that had been in their initial budget. The oscillations in the stamping plant's productivity, quality, and unit costs were reduced dramatically, and it won a Ford Quality 1 award. The components plant went from losing money to making a spectacular profit. The results of the staff group were less clear because its success depended on its customers' perceptions. It had been organized as a group of specialists—health, chemistry, safety, and so on. A redesign of the function created interdependent teams so that a team could look at a plant's whole occupational health and safety agenda. Plant managers were elated with the new approach. All the projects took several years, and the results lasted well into the future.

Each project started with problem definition and consideration of options for improving performance. The goal of the different projects was to apply systems thinking ideas to improve performance and learn from that effort. That the concepts implied personal and organizational change was only implicitly considered. Leo commented:

> Some might say that undertaking specific projects is a limited vision, but in the work of both Senge and Ackoff, there is the notion that systemic thinking is quite a revolutionary way of looking at the world. We did not utter the word ''change,'' partly because change at Ford might not be consistent with systems thinking. Traditional change involved incremental, segmented ways of thinking. We were advocating that reality was more complicated than the simple cause-and-effect relationships that managers look for in change efforts. So instead of calling these ''change projects,'' we labeled the effort a ''systems approach to management.''

To aid the learning effort, the application of the concepts included explicit assessment of the results. The four pilot projects had been successful in terms of introducing new concepts, producing business results, and developing a better understanding of the benefits of organizational learning approaches.

> We brought a body of understanding and principles into work groups and had a significant impact in human terms—in people's relations to one another, in stress reduction, and in improved interactions. We produced significant business results, not just spending $50,000 or

$100,000 on the effort and producing an incremental improvement of $100,000. We were constantly challenging ourselves for results 10 times the investment.

From the initial assessment and from 17 subsequent projects (1991 to 1999), I grew extraordinarily self-confident and maybe even arrogant. I felt invulnerable in my ability to engage in projects and have a large human and bottom-line impact. I was not alone in these efforts; I always had a cadre of capable people in organizational learning efforts and constructive relationships with line managers and senior managers.

I honestly believed that we could do these projects, synthesize, and learn what we needed. The notions of scale or change were not on the agenda, or that big word ''transformation.'' Learning more about these ideas was to follow from results, not lead them.

Testing and implementing organizational learning ideas at Ford were successful in many ways. The four official pilot projects led to many more official and unofficial efforts, too widespread and numerous to describe in this interview. The people who participated in the programs learned new skills, applied them in their work, and achieved personal and business results. After several years, when Leo and his team stepped back to look at the learning initiatives, two concepts—scale and change—emerged as significant issues that they had not fully conceptualized and addressed in Ford's learning efforts.

Scale

The original goal of the organizational learning efforts came from ideas of thinking about thinking and, in particular, thinking of Ford as a large system and improving it. An understanding of scale and its implications in engaging an organization as a system is what makes this concept different from the traditional approaches to change. Leo remarked:

Around 1996, we became interested in the issue of scale. How could we have a substantial impact on Ford? We were able to articulate the question but weren't able to come up with any great ideas. I can sit here today and honestly say I don't have any wisdom about scale, even after almost two dozen projects. There was a tremendous opportunity around 1998 to conduct big projects that would qualify as ''scale.''

I suggested working with four or five assembly plants simultaneously. The VP of manufacturing was disappointed, saying, ''Why not all 22 plants?'' I responded, ''Because I don't know how to do 22 all at once.'' I then realized I was working at Ford, a huge system. It would have been nice to go all the way, but I felt that I did not have a cadre or support structure in place to allow the momentum to take over.

Achieving scale doesn't work with loosely linked projects, such as the fractal design of the Society for Organizational Learning. A plant or team needs an incredible amount of energy and commitment for an organizational learning project. Not one of our projects took less than a year to complete; some were as long as three years. The facilitator or consultant worked at an intense, deep level. To replicate that quality of thinking and attention to a project in a collaborative way across 22 plants was beyond my imagination.

We didn't have projects crossing the three major disciplines—product development, manufacturing, sales and marketing.

We had meager resources to bring to bear. At one time, we had 35 people with organizational learning capability spread throughout the company. But in an organization as large as Ford, they were few and far between. They were so buried in local activities that freeing them to do something of the organizational scale the VP had suggested would have been extremely difficult.

To this day, I feel cheated. We earned the right to explore having a systems orientation in a very large organization. We shaped business practices, their processes, and their outcomes. We had the data and the people to make major contributions. We did large projects—a whole factory, a product development team, and a division. But we didn't have projects crossing the three major disciplines—product development, manufacturing, sales and marketing.

I raised the issue of scale at Society for Organizational Learning meetings and conference sessions. It was a plea for help. I kept saying that we needed to understand scale. My clock was running out. I'd been promoting organizational learning for seven or eight years. Some of the projects were huge in terms of the number of people involved. Some were as big as a small company, for example, a factory with 2,100 people. But I knew it was time to grow.

Discussions on the concept of scale had created insights into the various types of leadership needed for a large organization to engage in learning as a system. Leo was one of the people in the consortium of companies working with MIT researchers who helped create the concept of ‘‘network leadership.’’[2] Other types of leadership—executive and line leadership—were also essential for making progress on the issue of scale. As Leo commented:

> You have to have all three. The network leader cannot assume the role of the executive. You can sit down with the vice presidents of manufacturing, process reengineering, and the divisions and establish a rapport that you think will help take the organization to the next level. It’s a bit of a pipe dream or naiveté. I went into these discussions based on the belief that it was important work, so let’s move forward. But I was in the position of a network leader; I never came close to fulfilling the executive role. I should have collaborated more with a champion to engage the whole executive group.
>
> I remember being sad when I heard other stories in which the companies did have executive leadership, such as the chairman at Shell Oil or the CEO at Harley-Davidson. I would often think, ‘‘Wow, what would it be like to have leadership at that level in our projects?’’ Ford’s executive leaders were on the weak side. In the end, they didn’t help take us to a new level.

The learning efforts and attempts at scaling organizational learning projects were not totally without the involvement of Ford’s top management. A group of top managers, all vice presidents, were involved, active, and ready to meet regularly. Leo related:

> We established a group called ‘‘Leaders for Learning,’’ vice presidents from all functional activities. All had an organizational learning project going on somewhere. I thought they could share those experiences and explore the big questions: Should we grow it? Should we map something cross-functionally? With the help of the vice president for human resources, I started the group thinking about the issue of scale for the company.
>
> Initially, I thought the group would organize itself. The VPs all had significant responsibilities, were intellectual, and were at the top. But, as it turned out, they wanted me to set an agenda for every meeting. And I was paralyzed in a way. I called in some people I knew to interact with the group. Peter Senge, Russ Ackoff, and Bill O’Brien came, all in an attempt to give us a better, holistic picture of systems thinking and organizational learning. But it didn’t sell. There was no self-organizing. The group wanted to know, ‘‘What’s on the next meeting agenda?’’
>
> The VPs thought that perhaps they could get the president of Ford to join. This was a defining moment. If the president would join, the group could really be meaningful. I knew right then that the group effort was over.
>
> I went to the president on another matter and took the opportunity to mention the Leaders for Learning group and, really delicately, said that it would be great if he could become a member. He asked, ‘‘Who are all the members?’’ He looked at the list I had with me and said, ‘‘Hey, these guys are all the movers and shakers. They’re the ones who will get this stuff done. You have the right group. I’m not needed.’’ I just couldn’t tell him they thought he was the key ingredient. He said, in a declaratory way, ‘‘They are the group.’’
>
> When I told the VPs that the president felt they were the right group, it wasn’t long before the next meeting was called and fewer people attended. Fewer and fewer attended subsequent meetings. Then they questioned whether we should be getting together at all. The group just withered away. I couldn’t find a galvanizing way to keep them together.

The involvement of different types and levels of leadership were insufficient for addressing issues of scale and systems changes. Leo commented:

> We helped to formulate a theory about the need for executive, line, and network leadership for effective, sustainable change. This approach was very successful on projects that were in the boundary of a specific executive. For example, in manufacturing plants, the plant manager is the line leader, the area manager over that plant is the executive leader, and the network leader is usually an internal facilitator who works in the plant.

Executives can be sponsors and be supportive, but that role is very different when they are expected to influence the larger system. For example, in a product development team project, the executive director was supportive. When called on to influence the larger system, his role wasn't so clear-cut. We sought out the next level and involved more senior people, but their agendas were often more complicated. Jumping from the idea of having an executive, line manager, and networker at the project level didn't work so well at the higher systems level. There were missing ingredients that need to be discovered before making the upward leap.

We didn't challenge our thinking enough. What other dynamics should we have been aware of or sensitive to? We just did more of the same. As I reflect, I know it's not that simple. The success rate for cross-boundary projects was nowhere near the same as it was in the well-bounded situations in which the three roles worked interactively.

We helped to formulate a theory about the need for executive, line, and network leadership for effective, sustainable change.

Systemic Change

The issues of scale and influencing a large corporation like Ford with small, pilot projects raise questions about organizational change. The learning efforts sought to create systemic change. The desired change was to be based on an understanding of Ford and its suppliers and customers in order to align operations and improve overall performance.

How does an organization think of itself as a system, and from that perspective, measure and assess itself?

We tried several things in our quest to be systemic, and we were always interested in assessment. In the broadest sense of the concept, I looked for both a human contribution and a physical or process contribution. I had a notion of releasing people's abilities and not imposing constraints on that process. Releasing talent and letting it develop are outcomes of being systemic.

Second, there should be benefits to the company, consumers, and society at large from systemic improvements. Is the product better? Is the service better? What are the traditional measurements for these improvements? We had good evidence on what constitutes a good product and what constitutes good customer service. Our projects were structured at the outset to produce evidence.

Many executives were excited about the evidence, which had to do with the total vehicle (car or truck) as a whole system. They remembered when the focus was on only brakes or the transmission or the interior. It was either carburetion or drive-shaft dynamics. You were responsible for a certain piece of the vehicle and that's all you worried about. Whether the parts meshed or were totally optimized was more mystery than science.

Early in the 1990s, an executive engineer in one of my seminars said the car had been reduced to five systems (chassis, powertrain, electronic/electrical, body, and vehicle dynamics), and was on its way to one. You mean to tell me the engine and transmission and chassis are all one system, not separate components! Everyone was excited. The engineers had no qualms with systems ideas; they felt that from a physical standpoint, systemic thinking was fundamentally true.

For the engineering community, we reinforced systems concepts and added human behavior characteristics. If you put engineers from different divisions in one room, they start off cooperating with one another. Within a few months, they hate each other because they're all fighting for their own subsystem. None want to go back to their general manager and say, ''Well, I had to give a little in order for the other guy to have smoother engine performance.'' We were able to bring engineering teams together and have them think of themselves as an interdependent team, not separate subsystems reporting back to division champions. Conflicts were resolved between the vehicle director and the division general manager, not the engineer and the division boss.

People who gained an understanding of their roles in the organization and its product as a system acted differently. The differences constituted individual changes, which led to pressures for organizational changes. From a systems perspective, the traditional pressures for change—simplistic cause-and-effect relationships—had to be reconsidered. There were also implications for the results that could be attributed and claimed by the systems and learning initiatives.

The web of interdependence and causality is very intricate. I was in that web at several points, at several junctions in the Ford system. Were those high-leverage areas? Were they important? Were they successful? Those remain fascinating questions.

At the beginning, the thought leaders were present for the projects. Senge and Ackoff showed up many times and would hammer away at the principles under which the project had to be structured. I developed confidence over time; I had heard Senge and Ackoff continually reinforcing the ideas, and, in time, they started to sink in. They were genuinely authentic, grounded, and made a lot of sense. From my own prior experience with Ford, I measured the distance between what they were saying and how things were operating. There was a pretty good gap. This was a magnificent opportunity and a challenge. I was totally engrossed in the ideas and didn't frame the big question, as the participants did: ''We get the idea; it is extremely powerful, but how are we going to make it meaningful?''

Did a decade of organizational learning projects influence the company one way or another?

We promised team members that they could probably come up with solutions with a lot less stress and that they would enjoy and be proud of the results. There was a leap of faith that I think all the project participants recognized, particularly in the initial projects when we admitted that we were learning about application at the same time they were. We told them not to look to us for great wisdom upfront; we did not have it.

The Ford system was then operating physically and emotionally at a suboptimal level. There was competitive behavior, holding out information, and so forth. The pressure continued and even intensified. So the offer of something different was pretty compelling.

Did we have a systemwide impact on Ford? I don't know. I would like to think so. There is no evidence, however. There are many individual success stories. The evolution of this work pointed in the direction of scale. We could articulate the need, and we could have made some startling discoveries, but we never had the opportunity to do that. So the answer is speculative. Did a decade of organizational learning projects influence the company one way or another? I see some positive evidence. There is a focus on environmental concerns. Even though Ford has a dominant position in trucks, it has to achieve more fuel efficiency in order to be viable. There is a big effort to find alternative power plants. There is consideration of the consequences if the internal combustion engine and the transmission disappear. The company is investing enormous sums of money in alternative fuels, hydrogen power plants, and so forth.

Links from Glassblowing to Leading Learning

In my experience and study of personal and organizational change, I have found not only that people do not suddenly become someone new, but that in dramatic changes, such as Leo's retirement from Ford and his interest in glassblowing, there are elements of the past in the future. Leo's interests and pursuits in his 33 years at Ford are still found in his current passion. On the surface, the activities have taken on a different form, but at underlying psychological levels, they are fundamentally similar.

My transition to art has been a journey. In glassblowing, you are instantly confronted with things that have to happen altogether in a balanced way. (From time to time, I'll reflect on the Ford projects for a learning analogy. The elements of measurement, assessment, and results come to mind.) My immersion in art is evolutionary. My standards are constantly changing. When I made the very first piece, I was pretty proud just to get something physical. You would think that it didn't look like much. I've trashed many of those early pieces, although I've kept some. The initial achievement was to get all the forces to work together to make something, anything.

Glassblowing is a systemic endeavor because you're dealing with gravity, heat, liquid glass, and the reactions of your mind and body to what is happening. Everything has to flow; the timing has to be exact or it just doesn't happen. You start with a three-foot-long blow

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pipe. Then you stick the blow pipe in a vat of liquid glass, which is roughly 2,200 degrees. It is like probing a volcano. You rotate the pipe, called ''gathering,'' and eventually a clump of liquid glass forms at the end of it. You then remove it from the furnace. If you stop turning at any point, the glass will fall off the pipe on the floor or on your foot. If you don't turn at a certain speed, the glass lumps in certain areas and thins out in others. Then, as the glass loses its center of gravity, it spins out of control and winds up on the floor.

Your first challenge in becoming a glassblower is to coordinate a number of elements: how your eye perceives what's in front of you, how you turn the pipe, and how much glass you gather. Meanwhile, intense heat is blasting you, and you feel like you are going to be cooked alive. Fright makes you want to pull the pipe out of the furnace. Of course, if you do that, you lose all the molten glass you've gathered.

I marvel at the connections between glassblowing and the importance of thinking systemically. My understanding of systems thinking has helped me progress as a glass artist faster than I would have without this body of knowledge. I've definitely achieved a running start. I tested this in the marketplace. Six or seven months ago, I felt that I was not ready to put a Vic Leo piece on the market for at least another year. Then I went to a gallery and showed the owner several of my pieces. As we chatted, I was almost apologetic, saying, ''Well, I really didn't come in here so you'd take a piece or sell any of the work. I brought samples that represent different design techniques, and I'm looking for feedback.'' The owner said, ''I want all your work.'' I was stunned.

I had compressed the learning cycle. In a short time, my art was represented and sold by a gallery. I had pursued the artistic endeavor as a learner. What were the glass principles (theory)? How could I practice (application)? How could I get feedback (assessment)? What am I going to do differently (redesign)?

Patience plays a big role in glass work. Change does not happen immediately in glass; there is a time lag between reheating and shaping (delay). If I work for an hour, half an hour is devoted to preparing, setting up materials, and so on. Having an appreciation for the possibilities and the desired end result is crucial (aim/purpose).

Using the Metaphor

Organizational scholar and management consultant Gareth Morgan has long been a proponent of using metaphors from a well-known domain to explore new areas (1986; 1997).

Next, Leo and I reviewed the process of glassblowing to reflect on the organizational learning and change projects Leo led at Ford.

> There are five stages in glassblowing; the first two are gathering and shaping. The third is creating—perhaps the most important because it produces the vase, cylinder, bowl, platter, or whatever. Fourth is annealing. You take the piece that you've labored on and let it sit in a box in which the temperature is roughly 950 degrees for 12 to 14 hours, gradually cooling as the temperature in the annealer ramps down. This process takes away the thermal shock and releases the stresses that have formed in the glass from blowing, shaping, and decorating. The final, fifth stage is fine-tuning, display, and sale. It is everything you do with the piece after you remove it from the annealer.
>
> How is the process similar to organizational learning? Initially, *gathering* is seeking out the people who are predisposed to creating awareness and connecting with people and the organization. In glassblowing, you connect the pipe to the pool of liquid glass and gather it. In organizational projects, you connect with people and groups that are looking for a methodology.
>
> The second stage, *shaping,* is similar to problem definition in organizational projects. What do we want to do? What appears to be the problem here? Why are we setting out to do what we want to do? How do we use the tools of organizational learning to shape the project?
>
> The third stage, *creating,* is application and implementation. In glassblowing, you are making the object. In organizational projects, you are improving quality and productivity or gaining robustness.
>
> *Annealing* has no real analogy in organizational practice. As interventionists, change agents, and transformers, do we ever let people sit and allow thermodynamics to play themselves out? At Ford, a project always had a beginning and an end. We always stayed with the customer. In some cases, we catalogued the results. But there was never time after the creating process or implementation when we just sat and waited. We never thought that the change needed to work to a state of stability. We quickly jumped to the fifth stage of writing the project up, looking for approval, and selling it as the basis for the next project.

Learning to Anneal

According to Kurt Lewin, social systems tend to be in a state of homeostasis, held in place by forces that are in balance and create a status quo. Changes in social systems require a readiness for change, *unfreezing*. Once unfrozen, the social system can adapt new ways, using new models for behavior and the psychological safety for trying them, and then *change* happens. Quite naturally, a third step, *refreezing,* occurs as the people and social system settle back to a homeostatic state (see Schein, 2002, for the three-stage change model).

The process of annealing emphasizes the importance of gradual refreezing. While the observed tendency of social systems to refreeze may appear to occur naturally, little thought has been given in practice to its function as a natural, important process. Instead, organizations finish one change program and start the next one. Parts of a large organization may have multiple initiatives going on at different levels without sequencing and refreezing. In the glassblowing metaphor, a lack of awareness of the importance of annealing fails to allow the stress to dissipate and ignores the benefits of change and new ways of operating.

> When I thought about the glassblowing stages, I realized that there was something completely missing in the way we initiated learning and change. We started a project, created results, quantified them, and declared victory or some emergent benefit that was good for the company and workforce. And we left. I don't remember doing any annealing in organizational learning practice. After we set many dynamics in motion with these projects, we should have had time to let the stresses work themselves out, to simply relax. We glossed over the annealing stage. In glass, all the dynamics—the heat, the color, the shape, the coefficients, the timing, and all this stuff—must have a natural evolution of ''quietness'' so the glass can reach its final outcome. Leaving out annealing in learning and change initiatives is a void in our understanding that should be explored.

To implement annealing in the corporate world is a challenge. If we return to the question of a systemwide impact, we face the issue of how many initiatives can we do at once. Can we get scale? There is no time to anneal the efforts you've already made, to let the stress resolve itself before moving forward. If you have success, you have to go quickly to the next level. To anneal would be to wait and let things play out.

Leaving out annealing in learning and change initiatives is a void in our understanding that should be explored.

The corporate world isn't tolerant; it always seeks another solution. Very quickly, with a new CEO, Ford brought in the GE model. I'm not knocking the GE model; I don't know that much about it, other than it came in like a gorilla. Everyone was taught this new model and sent out on a multitude of improvement projects. In many ways, this effort washed away much of what we had built during a decade of learning initiatives.

This new effort quickly disassociated itself from Ford's past. It is still a thorn in my foot, regardless of the leadership, ideology, or philosophical issues. When a new leader takes the helm, he or she should assess the assets already in the organization. For a new plant manager, it's like walking into a plant and finding that certain machines are valuable assets and need to remain because they are essential to efficiency. There may be some things that need to change, but you should carefully assess the value of what you already have.

New CEOs who proclaim they are going to completely change the systems and the culture are naive at best. They'd do better to keep and strengthen the strong points, work hard to eliminate the weak points, and learn new methods and practices consistent with the company's purpose.

What Matters Most?

I asked Leo what mattered most as he reflected on his career and leadership.

> What we learned and created with our initiatives was a corporate asset. It was a solid value proposition at extremely low cost. We developed our own projects, and the projects grew in scope and scale. We developed our internal people, many of whom advocated a systemic view of the business. Our reliance on consultants was minimal because we had internal people leading and learning. The personal and business results created immense energy.
>
> Our model was that once you had an engagement, you were part of the group. You went at full tilt and gave full effort. What mattered most were ground-level results—development of people and the organization. The other things I tried, such as the Leaders for Learning and leveraging process leadership's role in reengineering, were important initiatives, but I'm not sure if I had an authentic relationship with senior executives.

I noted that we needed to carefully judge Leo's efforts and Ford's progress. The initiatives undertaken were all locally successful. People were engaged and they learned; the business profited. Does being the person who led the program that rolled through the corporation matter most? Implicit in our conversation was the notion of being able to claim that he had changed everybody in the corporation. Leo commented:

> That's a very seductive concept. Without a doubt, the greatest fuel for motivation and excitement was the intensity that we had in each project. It was marvelous to see and work in. Yet, in a large corporation like Ford, the idea that we needed to grow systems thinking and organizational learning kept pushing us along.
>
> From a systemic viewpoint, we set a lot in motion. It wasn't wasted work to influence a system and its people to have more awareness of their interdependency. I believe systemic thinking is powerful. Eventually, it is the road many corporations will travel. For my deepest wish, I want Ford to be one of those companies. I think systems thinking has great benefit for the company's longevity and its contribution to society.

Leo's preceding words are a good summary for what he accomplished at Ford. From the known outcomes of learning projects, significant business accomplishments and personal results were achieved. Other efforts flourished for a time, each contributing in some ways to the goals of the company. The relative costs and benefits are unknown. Those efforts were not overtly sustained when a new program swept through Ford.[3] Does that rule out their effectiveness?

Reflection on the decade of effort on learning and change leaves some questions. How can the process of engaging a team or division in developing its learning grow in scale to a large corporation? By what standards do we assess systemic change? What can and should we expect in terms of business change and transformation of its people? How much time should an organization have to anneal the learning and change that has occurred in order to provide a foundation for future growth and development?

Notes

1. This is described in F. Simon et al., ''Creating a Learning Lab—and Making It Work'' in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook,* eds. P. Senge et al. (New York: Doubleday Currency, 1994): 554–560.
2. See P. Senge et al. *The Dance of Change* (New York: Doubleday Currency, 1999): 167–173.
3. See ''Driving Change: An Interview with Ford Motor Company's Jacques Nasser.'' *Harvard Business Review* 77, no. 2 (March–April 1999): 76–88.

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