

Reflections

The SoL Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change



SPECIAL REPORT

Ten Years of Learning in Companies: A SoL France Research Report

President's Note

Étienne Collignon

Part One

Report on the Action Research

Irène Dupoux-Couturier, Béatrice Quasnik, Catherine Redelsperger, Alain de Vulpian

The Words to Say "Learning"

Triggers of Learning

Pathways to Learning

Practicing Learning in All Its Forms

A Particular Type of Change Agent

Companies Stretched Between Two Poles

Conclusion

Part Two

Getting It into Perspective

Learning in Light of Evolving Social Practices in France

Catherine Redelsperger and Béatrice Quasnik

Toward a New Type of Systemic Leadership: An Awakening Awareness

Irène Dupoux-Couturier

Empathy, Socioperception, and Anticipation

Alain de Vulpian

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE 11.1-2

**C. Sherry Immediato**

The conception of SoL was inspired in part by the possibility of a network of vibrant learning communities around the world, united around some common questions and informing each other through diverse interests.

We have always imagined that

Reflections is a vehicle for that cross-fertilization. It is therefore a dream come true to share with you a recent edition of the *Cahiers de SoL France* featuring their 10th anniversary research project report on a decade of learning in companies.

Summaries of the content follow, so I would prefer to focus on SoL France as a learning community and as a leader in developing the SoL network. When I participated in the 10th Anniversary Symposium, I noted how SoL France has in many ways been the heart of the global SoL community. They hosted the first global meeting of SoL members in Bordeaux in 1999 before we knew enough to call such things “forums.” Members of SoL France were among a few visionary leaders in 2001 who called for regular global “jamborees” where members could exchange their questions and learnings, and expand their networks of collaboration. They hosted gatherings in 2002, 2004, and 2007 for global coordinators to determine the goals, time, and place of such meetings, leading to our forums in Helsinki in 2003, Vienna in 2005, and Oman in 2008.

Facilitating such collaboration is indeed remarkable, but as the following report implies, it has been the smallest part of SoL France’s activity. In most instances, the larger SoL community has been invited into SoL France’s explorations. As soon as I begin to recall specific topics and conversations, others come to mind, and I am reminded of the significance of this contribution.

I won’t recount the details of this history here, but I believe all of us have benefitted. I hope you will join me in acknowledging SoL France and its long-time coordinator, Irène Dupoux-Couturier, for their leadership and service, and for truly stimulating our collective intelligence.

While I expect that this particular report will elicit a fair amount of admiration among SoL members, I know I join SoL France’s leadership team in also imagining that it will be matched by emulation! I hope more of us will respond with our own action research reports so that we will expand our collective understanding of learning in companies and beyond.

And so we present to you this special issue *avec plaisir* (with pleasure)! Enjoy. ■

C. Sherry Immediato
Publisher

Ten Years of Learning in Companies

ÉTIENNE COLLIGNON

President of SoL France, Solvay Senior Expert Learning



Étienne Collignon

When we decided to research a decade of learning in celebration of SoL France's 10th anniversary, we couldn't have imagined how much this initiative would enrich our own thinking and action. In this issue, we share the results of 18 months of work by four persevering

researchers. In a world in economic crisis, they felt an urgent need to interact with the companies being studied and analyze the systems in action. In eight fields of research, they followed the energy at work, feeble sparks or strong collective dynamics, wherever it flowed. They listened and allowed the reflections and learning to emerge, their questions sometimes triggering new advances. As a group and with the companies they studied, they lived the experience of an action research team to the fullest, an experience that was itself profoundly enlightening and in harmony with the topic at hand.

The intermediate results of the research had an amplifying effect in SoL France. Here really was the road to the future! We hadn't been mistaken! The members of SoL France, whether company managers, consultants working toward learning, or change agents, all felt encouraged to take bold steps in going further in initiatives and in developing deep and effective capacity. This shift occurred in a difficult economic context that raises questions about the society we share and that exhibits a growing interest in the values we represent.

Our research confirmed that the visionary thought involved in learning is not a utopian fad. People at different levels of responsibility and in many organizations often work together to quietly design progressive projects, transform organizations and people, and find a way out of crisis through the development of human qualities and capacities.

This research project has already brought members of SoL France a shared vision of our ambition for transforming organizations and practicing collective intelligence. By making these results available to a wide public, we hope to connect the people involved and accelerate the desire to make our organizations more human and more alive. ■

EXECUTIVE DIGEST 11.1-2

Part One: Report on the Action Research**SoL France's Action Research Program**

*Irène Dupoux-Couturier, Béatrice Quasnik,
Catherine Redelsperger, and Alain de Vulpian*

In celebration of SoL France's 10th anniversary, its board of directors launched an action research project to learn how member companies adapted to a changing environment during that decade. The researchers found an increasing number of change agents working quietly together to find a way out of the economic crisis by supporting the development of human qualities and capacities. These formal and informal leaders perceive emergent opportunities and imagine other forms of organization, management, motivation, markets, and production methods – a critical skill for ensuring a company's vitality and prosperity in the years ahead. By supporting these change agents, the SoL France network has contributed to the evolution of some companies from a mechanistic logic toward an organic one.

Part Two: Getting It into Perspective**Learning in Light of Evolving Social Practices in France**

Catherine Redelsperger and Béatrice Quasnik

Changing societal norms and practices have influenced learning practices in organizations. This article highlights six interconnected dynamics that have had an effect on collective learning: the disappearance of barriers between professional and personal life; the acceptance of expressions of personality; a reevaluation of the concept of "collective"; the internet as a creator of interactions; people's aspiration for more democracy; and sustainable development. These trends have caused profound shifts that stretch well beyond the world of work.

Toward a New Type of Systemic Leadership: An Awakening Awareness

Irène Dupoux-Couturier

SoL France's action research project found strong evidence that a new type of leadership is emerging, able to adapt to the growing complexity of our systems and face the current economic crisis by relying on people, the essential resource of any organization. These emerging leaders are not dreamy idealists but "pragmatic humanists" from throughout the ranks. In this article, Irène Dupoux-Couturier makes the case that we have reached a tipping point in the development of a form of leadership capable of causing sustainable and efficient changes in the world. To be effective, modern leaders must transform not only their businesses but themselves as well.

Empathy, Socioperception, and Anticipation

Alain de Vulpian

Today, more and more people have highly developed "socioperception" skills that play an integral role in their professional lives; that is, they possess a deep systemic intuition of the condition and functioning of the social systems within which they operate. These individuals sense the most significant potential future directions and intuit opportunities for positive intervention. In this article, Alain de Vulpian looks at humankind's intellectual and emotional evolution over the past several centuries and the factors that have led to a rise in a "new society of people" based on empathy and socioperceptive abilities. ■

PART ONE

Report on the Action Research

INTRODUCTION 11.1-2

SoL France's Action Research Program

IRÈNE DUPOUX-COUTURIER, BÉATRICE QUASNIK,
CATHERINE REDELSPERGER, AND ALAIN DE VULPIAN



**Irène Dupoux-
Couturier**



Béatrice Quasnik



**Catherine
Redelsperger**



Alain de Vulpian

Overview

SoL appeared in France in 1999, one year after its birth in Boston and London. Looking back on our 10th anniversary and trying to imagine the future, the board of directors of SoL France decided to launch an action research program focused on a decade of organizational learning. Program design and implementation were put in the hands of a team of SoL France members: Irène Dupoux-Couturier, Béatrice Quasnik, Catherine Redelsperger, and Alain de Vulpian.

As members of the project team, we examined our roles: What are we doing? Who are the colleagues connected to our network, and what are they doing? What are their life experiences, hopes, difficulties, and discouragements? What are they doing in practical terms, independent of theories, and what are the effects of their actions? What does SoL provide them, and what has it not managed to provide? We examined what we knew about the SoL member companies and asked, What has happened in these companies during recent years, as part of the SoL network or regarding their own concerns?¹ What are the systemic processes that accelerate or retard the movement toward an organization based on learning, intense and sustainable vitality, adaptation to the environment, and wise governance?

The goal of the action research project was to conduct micro-sociological research to reveal the life experiences and evolution of social systems and processes in equilibrium or in movement. It also focused on actions currently unfolding to encourage better adjustment and fine-tuning to a changing environment. Rather than produce a definitive body of knowledge, the research was designed to lead to actions and anticipate future directions. *We found that, beyond its initial objectives, an action research program encourages increased awareness among those who take part as observers or witnesses, and in so doing, transforms them. It also encourages them to connect with each other, dialogue, and intensify their networking activity.*²

Field Research

In this phase of the program, we chose to carry out our investigations in companies that were involved with SoL to some degree and to interview men and women participating, consciously or not, in the movement. Eight companies, all but one members of SoL, were chosen to participate in the research. We knew in advance that each of these companies was going through transformations.

They were all very different in both size and activity, ranging from 500 to 150,000 employees, in industrial valves, bulk chemicals, pharmaceuticals, railways, telecommunications, foodstuffs, beauty, sports equipment, etc.

In one way or another, all of the people we interviewed are looking to change the life and habits of their companies or of the domain or sector for which they are responsible.

Sampling

In each company, the field research began with an interview with Sol's principal contact there. Through this interview, the researcher identified other contacts within the company to interview about the changes currently under way. We interviewed around 40 people, some several times, and also held two group discussions. The fifty-odd directors, managers, and employees of the companies we worked with make up a sample population that is both homogenous and heterogeneous.

Homogenous. In one way or another, all of the people we interviewed are looking to change the life and habits of their companies or of the domain or sector for which they are responsible. They seek to help the company make better use of its human potential, adjust to its environment, improve its cohesion, and nourish its vitality. Some emphasized anticipating possible threats and opportunities. *Analysis of the interviews shows that the majority of the participants can be described as pragmatic, humanist change agents.*

Heterogeneous. The interviewees occupy varied positions. Some are senior managers, others are ordinary employees, and still others are trade-union representatives. Some have specific change agent functions in the management chart, while others have found themselves in situations where they have had to improvise. Some of the participants have change as part of their character. Some are supported by their senior managers, others are tolerated, and others ignored.

Interviews

The interviews were largely non-directional. The interviewers engaged in deep listening, which stimulates the speaker's self-projection (or mental proprioception) and increases awareness of the systems in which he or she is involved (for information on focused interviews, see Robert K. Merton). The researchers explored the life experiences of the interviewees and considered them sources of information about their companies and partners in the research project. Through the interviews, many participants sharpened their awareness of what they were doing and what made them "tick." They saw themselves more clearly as change agents and as members of an informal network of change agents. We guaranteed confidentiality for both the company and the interviewee. It was left to each company to decide what to disclose.

Analysis

The researchers analyzed each interview from both psycho-sociological and socio-systemic points of view to provide a diagnosis and "read between the lines." We examined all interviews in two dimensions, by company and by theme.

Feedback

We are in the process of compiling feedback for each participating company. We're organizing it according to the company's wishes; it can be by individual, a combination of all the interviews from the company concerned, or a combination of data from more than one company. ■

The Words to Say “Learning”

Words, syntax, and the connotations of language are tools for understanding reality. Language is a living phenomenon. For example, we invent words to describe objects that at one time did not exist, such as “airplane.” We also absorb words of foreign origin; “*le bled*,” from the Moroccan, is now currently used in French to mean “village.” Our language is built up of words from a variety of sources, and within one and the same language, we speak in different tongues: slang, high brow, literary, technical, etc. Language serves as a code for dialogue, decision, domination, information, seduction, learning, and understanding.

1. The Word “Learning”

When preparing for the action research project, we started by looking at the word “learning” (in French, *apprenance*), with a certain amount of difficulty, but with great attention. The truth is that this term continually causes us problems and is sometimes downright cumbersome. Nevertheless, SoL France uses this word to describe its own specific nature.

We won’t try here to define what is meant by “learning organization”; rather, we shall try to shed light on the relationship our interviewees have with the associated language. *It*

is interesting to know that in France, the word “apprenance” appeared precisely from the period when Peter Senge’s The Fifth Discipline was being translated. When the translators wanted to register the word, they discovered that it had already been recorded some months earlier.

The word was in the air at the time.

But while this word has had a degree of success at SoL and among some of its members, it is not unanimously accepted. Usually when someone employs it, another person asks, “What does that mean?” and the question leads to a discussion. “Learning” and “organizational learning” are catch-all phrases into which speakers stuff different things. However, in this context, two words crop up frequently: “learning together.”

As a result, we decided that during the research project, we would usually use the expression “*to learn together*,” thus emphasizing that learning is both an action performed by individuals and a collective undertaking.

Learning is both an action performed by individuals and a collective undertaking.

2. The Language of Learning

We discovered from listening to our interviewees that the language of learning has widely differing characteristics. We observed a “language of experts” that tends to stabilize a linguistic corpus and an emerging language that invents words to name practices that are rooted in dialogue, exchange, and

questioning. We have also noticed that when companies strongly focus on their business activity, the language of that activity dominates and does not allow the addition of the language of learning. In this case, learning is integrated into the language of the company's core activity.

A language of experts

Any language of experts, like all specializations of this sort, comes close to being a jargon. In France, a preliminary characteristic of jargon is the adoption of terminology from elsewhere, usually English, for example "feedback" and "bottom up." (This practice of borrowing from English is frequent in business and in French society in general).

The language of learning reveals relationships.

The second characteristic is the combination of terms to create evocative expressions that give rise to multiple interpretations. Examples include "shared vision," "trial and error strategy," "learning networks," and so on.

The third characteristic of an expert language is the addition of "co-" in front of words. Two examples are "co-construction" and "co-creation," constructed on the model of "cooperation."

The fourth characteristic is borrowing not from a natural language but from a technical language, often one linked to methodologies, for example Kaizen methods, or from the human sciences, such as "systemic analysis." The resulting jargon may have a distancing effect or create confusion. The lack of simplicity and people's difficulty in understanding what exists behind the words results in a level of distrust in some companies.

Another aspect that should not be ignored is that a language is also a means of binding a group together and creating a feeling of belonging: There

are those who speak and understand the language of learning, and the others. Language has the power to integrate a group or community. As a result, a newcomer can feel obligated to go through the process of learning the language, simply to feel an affinity with others.

Many of our interviewees referred to Sol's seminar on "Fundamentals of Organizational Learning,"³ during which they were initiated into the vocabulary, concepts, practices, state of mind, and attitude of learning.

This expert language is enriched by what we have called "a language looking for itself."

A language looking for itself

We have identified a wide variety of learning practices. These practices are created on the fly in concrete situations encountered in companies. Sometimes they are reproduced in the same company or elsewhere; they receive names. That's how experience gives rise to expressions and melodic names for methods, approaches, tools, notions, and concepts, for example, "180-degree turns," "learning networks," and "apprenticeship contract."

The language of learning is in motion; it's a living language.

A relational language

We also saw that the language of learning was centered in relationships. It is a language that "reveals" relationship. It makes explicit and brings out "the unsaid" – what is happening within me, between me and the other, and between me and the system – in a form that does not shy away from emotions, sensitivity, sympathy, empathy, and subjectivity.

This characteristic is linked to the fact that learning approaches include dimensions of personal development, emotional and relational intelligence, and systemic complexity, which reflect a deep interest in interactions.

This increase in awareness concerns the individual, team, and organization.

We will come back to this dimension in the article on the practices of learning. Many of these practices are a way to trigger new awareness of different realities simultaneously experienced by different people by putting them into words. Edgar Morin speaks of “many-eyed” viewpoints. *This awareness enables one to leave behind illusions about oneself. It also promotes the acquired skills that would have remained hidden if they had not been made explicit through words.*

For example: In an interview, a group used the expression “collective autonomy” to describe how team members and leaders learn to assume autonomy through their participation in working groups. This expression surprised the committee that was working on putting 10 years of learning into perspective.

To explain, we need a language. If a company, because of its culture, refuses to use words that are vehicles for relationships, the system, and emotions, it becomes blind and deaf to part of what is happening. ■

If a company refuses to use words that are vehicles for relationships, the system, and emotions, it becomes blind and deaf to part of what is happening.

Triggers of Learning

We invited our partners to talk about the changes that have occurred in their companies that are in line with learning. We did not insist on using this term, as we soon discovered that it had no clear, consistent meaning for interviewees. We asked them to describe changes, structures, or interventions that are in line with what they are trying to do.

The terminology varied from one person to another. Some rejected the terms “learning” and “apprenticeship,” while others liked them. One said: “I do not use the word ‘learning’; I talk about cultural change.” Another stated: “Our goal is to ensure that each of our 85,000 employees is a cell in a living, self-adapting organism. But the concept of perpetual learning is easier to spread than the idea of a living, evolving company.”

Some recurring elements appeared that express the idea of movement and the desire to identify where we are coming from and where we want to go. Here are a few:

Where we come from:	Where we are going:
Rational organization	Living, learning organization
Hierarchy	Participation, heterarchy, leadership
Centralization	Interaction
Direct, command	Catalyze, facilitate
Impose one's views	Listen, bring to birth
Business activity	Finance
Short term	Anticipation

The cases we found of the emergence of learning in companies are extremely varied, and the circumstances that triggered it are very different.⁴ We will first examine the circumstances and then try to make sense of the variety of forms of the learning path that we observed.

Triggering a Learning Journey

Our contacts suggested that a wide variety of openings, innovative behaviors, initiatives, and awakenings trigger adjustments that lead companies to improve on current reality. Sometimes, a change process emerges in a company or a division that until then had remained closed to change; sometimes, it's a key initiative that follows earlier events.



Sophie Jun

External consultants and coaches often play an important role in developing learning pathways.

Three situations commonly occur: In one, the change trigger is lost in the mists of time; in the other two, the spark comes from bottom-up initiatives or leaders in positions of authority. External consultants and coaches often play an important role in developing learning pathways.

1. Any trigger is lost in the mists of time

We witnessed this dynamic in two of the companies we visited; the “opening” was part of their culture, as if it were in their DNA.

One of the companies keeps a close eye on the life of its teams and human society – consumers and citizens – and its relationship with the planet’s ecology. It constantly seeks to anticipate changes

that will improve its adjustment to a changing reality. This attitude is clearly deep seated and self-supporting, with no easily identifiable triggers. Managers and employees practice openness. Socioperceptive⁵ employees are valued and encouraged to persevere, and organized socio-perceptive structures proliferate (see Part 2, “Empathy, Socioperception, and Anticipation”).

In the other company, the attitude of openness and listening is just as deeply rooted and integrated into the culture, but is less comprehensive. The company tries to anticipate the evolution of society and consumers, while more traditional attitudes dominate team leadership.

In both cases, the type of culture is likely related to the personality of the founders or their successors.

2. Triggers from bottom-up initiatives

In many cases, team learning is triggered by one or more initiatives from the base, with no input from higher levels, who can be unaware of it,

tolerate it, or even encourage it. Clearly these companies are alive. “Things” are happening that have nothing to do with the formal decisions of those in established power. Among the various cases we observed:

- A middle manager reads a book, buys a management tool, or decides to take part in a training seminar that he or she chooses from a catalog of available offerings. Such seemingly minor (and inexpensive) commitments can trigger real learning experiences.
- In a company with fairly standard methods of management, executives in three different middle management positions find that they share similar outlooks and collaborate to transform the way part of the company is run.
- A middle manager is given a relatively new and unusual responsibility. He is not driven by a desire for change or openness, but he wants to achieve his task. Through well-developed intuition, he understands the unusual characteristics of the population that concerns him. He invents entirely new ways to handle the situation; others quickly imitate these approaches.
- In different functional positions in the company, people with an open, humanist attitude grow in number. They are often quite socioperceptive and are effective change agents. They improvise new ways to “grease the wheels”; in the field, they use their natural predisposition to achieve desired objectives and facilitate emergence of desirable characteristics or avert dysfunctional processes.
- In several companies where centralization, hierarchy, and rational “bolt-tightening” serve as official policy, we found a wide range of fragmented processes for opening, calls for participation, catalysts of natural innovation, and signs of emergence. These initiatives do not reflect official policy, but occur in response to various situations taking place at different decentralized levels. The effects of these actions are cumulative and can reach a tipping point.

3. Triggers initiated by leaders

The arrival of a new boss convinced of the need for openness can be decisive. However, more commonly, existing bosses change course in response to an environmental change, the emergence of a new challenge, or awareness of a situation that is perhaps old but has long remained unnoticed. Their initiative is reflected in the life and culture of the company or division, in particular through the introduction of change agents.

In certain sectors, leaders have become conscious that radical change in growth technologies must be accompanied by an equally radical change in corporate culture.

Changes of course are of various types and origins. Some examples:

- Over the past decade, senior managers became aware that traditional R&D could no longer supply the necessary innovation. This awareness frequently prompted greater openness and appeals for staff to collaborate with each other and the outside world.
- In certain sectors, leaders have become conscious that radical change in growth technologies must be accompanied by an equally radical change in corporate culture.
- The transition from a monopoly to open competition compelled leaders in one company to initiate a fundamental redesign.
- In many of the companies we studied, transformation of the field of competition through the geographical expansion of markets or the entry of new competitors prompted senior managers to broaden their perspectives, enhance their listening, and consider the long term in their thinking.
- Realizing that the company’s business lines and management culture had no future, a



Sophie Juhn

The domino system of the Berlin Wall

- director planned a radical reorientation and involved staff and the outside world in a creative reassessment.
- In another company, top managers recently realized that the environment was the key to major strategic development opportunities. This understanding triggered a process of interaction and collaboration inside and outside the company to anticipate ways of incorporating these opportunities.

- The economic crisis stimulated awareness among a number of top managers that their company was no longer adapted to the world that was developing: It was too focused on short-term financial and technical/scientific success, distant from its staff, and cut off from youth. As such, it wasn't able to attract high-potential employees, and existing staff was losing morale and resilience.

Most of the companies have found that the traditional mode of innovation based primarily on research and development is no longer enough to fuel their development.

In recent years, a complicity has tended to develop between change agents, more or less free spirits who identify and collude with each other, and senior managers who are becoming aware of the usefulness of these employees and encourage or even organize them. ■

Pathways to Learning

Our contacts reported being involved in or observing many cases of interventions that seem to be moving toward openness and learning. These may be timely interventions of limited duration, step-by-step changes, slow evolution over long periods, successive swerves, or the embedding and institutionalization of new systems or processes.

The word “pathways” is appropriate because these are often groping processes, as the people involved listen to the feedback the initiatives generate and the emergent situations to which they give rise, looking for possible adjustments. *New situations emerge that call for new interventions. This same pathway represents the learning process itself.*

Some pathways turn out to be loops: One action leads to another, which impacts the first through double-loop feedback. Others are spirals: New actions integrate feedback and bounce into new futures; throughout the process, they incorporate lessons, challenges, and discoveries. Others are more linear: Steps are not climbed from landing to landing but integrate advances and setbacks like any process of life and creation.

At this point in our report, we illustrate these pathways, describing the features observed in the field, which we have numbered as examples. These elements enable us to step back and define the changes experienced over a decade.

The interventions are intended to:

- stimulate innovation in products and services;
- involve staff in the planning of strategic decisions or in their implementation;
- drive cultural change;
- enhance perception of the field, scope, or target; or
- focus on personal development and the transformation of mental models.

Finally, deliberately or not, some transformation strategies turn out to be unstable, contradictory, or paradoxical.

1. Stimulating Innovation in Products or Services

Most of the companies studied have found at one time or another, some as long as a decade ago, that the traditional mode of innovation based primarily on research and development is no longer enough to fuel their development. With varying degrees of success, they have involved their staff and the outside world. They expanded their contacts with the scientific community and sometimes institutionalized these contacts. Many put their researchers in touch with anthropologists who shed light on the changes to be expected among those who will use the products of the future. They have increased the use of suggestion boxes among their staff.



A path against the current

Over time, the efforts spawned networks, which one company calls “innovactors.” The name has become established, and employee innovation has become more complex and more efficient.

Example 1. One company installed suggestion boxes nationally. The number of ideas collected was small. It turned out that the jury appointed by the hierarchy was afraid to accept disturbing, sometimes revolutionary, ideas. Based on this observation, *the company has established a completely different, non-hierarchical system. The initiator of an idea posts it in a conspicuous place where everyone can read it, and if people agree with it, they sign up.* In this particular case, notice boards hang by the cafeteria queue, a place where people have to wait and tend to read the notices. This creates a kind of bazaar, a marketplace of ideas. If you like an idea, you can propose yourself as a supporter or sponsor. *Small teams of supporters form naturally. There are no longer juries, just partners.* One year after the introduction of the process, tens of thousands of ideas have been submitted, and many have been developed.

2. Involving Staff in Planning and Implementing Strategies

These actions tend to be a part of governance. Companies may combine a variety of objectives to varying degrees, for example, improving strategy, strengthening staff involvement, dehierarchizing the business culture, and making products more effective and relevant.

Facing up to a “blocked” future

The leaders of a group, division, or subsidiary become aware that the future is blocked and, to ensure the continued existence of the unit, they must work out radically new strategies. They search for these strategies and implement them by practicing openness.

Example 2. The chairman of a European group has become aware over the last two or three years that the company cannot continue to expand and maintain its profitability over a 10-year horizon without adapting its products and production methods to meet ecological and sustainable development challenges.

To transform this new orientation into a strategic action plan, senior managers, staff, and union representatives have participated in a dialogue for several years. The group expects to enrich its strategies and transform its relationships.

Example 3. An English factory of one of the groups we studied was in danger of being closed. Local managers involved employees in a collective effort to think up strategies that could avoid this outcome. The group asked senior managers for a year's reprieve. It created networks with local public and private organizations, the town council, and the university. New opportunities sprung up, including new partnerships, products, and profitability.

The shared enthusiasm of the staff was exemplary. The director spent time at corporate headquarters to explain, get them to wait, demonstrate success, and ultimately prevent the closure of the plant, which has turned toward new horizons. At group HQ, the learning that occurred through the consensus of local management and staff aroused initial resistance and subsequent astonishment.

Adjust the way strategies are implemented
Upper managers set strategies and objectives, and the relevant employees defined the forms or methods of application, the "operational strategies." Feedback eventually led management to modify the strategy and objectives.

Example 4. In a company of engineers, the base rejected the strategic vision of the five-year plan developed by top managers. For the 2012 plan, managers decided to do it differently. Senior leaders developed a first draft that they put forward for reaction from the base. The ping-pong between top and bottom lasted longer than expected, but resulted in the establishment of a consensus view.

Example 5. The goal is for the company to enact in real life all of its newly defined values. In two cases, management defined the values; the question became how to support the base in appropri-

ating these values and incorporating them into a variety of business lines. A working group with a relatively long time horizon was organized. The group searched for a satisfactory fit between effective action and the company's objectives. It appropriated the values, transforming them to a certain degree, and sent the proposal back to management. *Interestingly, both groups, at the top and the base, feel that the initiatives came from their own side.*

Example 6. Shared governance take many forms. In many companies, we see learning networks appear in product innovation, management development, and customer relationship management. They can be formal, but the role and effectiveness of informal networks is increasingly evident. They take different names over time: decentralized platform, management platform, bridge groups, action progress meetings, group feedback, etc.

One of our interviewees wrote about them: "In a business transformation, the role of networks is to put people in motion, helping them become aware of what is possible without waiting for everything to be completely spelled out and defined. The purpose of these learning networks is to strengthen individual and collective capacity to learn and adapt. The customers' new needs are at the heart of the network. . . . The network is a place for authorization and open dialogue, a space in which to develop the adaptability of the company and its employees. Innovation, project management, and experimentation are all already well developed within companies. Often these facilities are implemented among a representative sample of employees and subsequently rolled out and generalized among people who have not had the opportunity of thinking things out to the trial stage. *Learning networks provide an opportunity for simultaneously setting many actors to work on an issue . . . they are places of learning and experimentation.* Sometimes the question arises of the relationship of a learning network to line management. I think we should combine these two forms of management, particularly in large organizations."

Collective intelligence feeds into a decision

Example 7. A company struggled with how to prepare its staff for a disruptive change. The chief strategist and the director of human resources agreed that the best way to prepare everyone for the move was to involve them in selecting the new site. They informed the staff of the need for the move, so employees felt directly involved in choosing the site. Staff and management carried out joint research to find a location near a motorway exit that meets employees' logistical needs (housing, schools, public transportation, etc.). Everybody felt involved; the team found an ideal place; the strategic decision took place by consensus; and people throughout the company were happy.

3. Driving a Culture Change

Most of the interventions and operations analyzed affect the culture of the companies concerned. For example, they contribute to a move toward greater consideration of customers, a growing number of initiatives taken, a more collective attitude, "dehierarchization," consensus building, etc. However, the goal of these initiatives is not to achieve these things, although some interventions explicitly focus on managing change in the corporate culture.

Example 8. This company was fragmented into compartmentalized units, people, and services working in isolation. An external consultant introduced the idea of "team players." Numerous meetings have helped to create a shared language around this concept. The new communication/cohesion improved the company's understanding of market realities, and enabled consistent and rapid responses. When we interviewed representatives from this company, the issue seemed to be inventing ways to function as a team without being together all the time.

Example 9. A large company with a strong traditional culture linked to a certain state of technology development became aware that this culture would not allow it to successfully enter developing markets characterized by radically different technologies. The company realized that it faced the

major challenge of changing culture. It acquired modern companies with the radically different culture. Managers deliberately controlled the fusion to create a new culture to meet the competitive requirements in an area of leading-edge technology.

Example 10. In other cases, a projected change to the culture only gradually became clear. The senior management of a unit of a large group was split across different geographical areas. The company launched a consolidation project. The managing director became aware that the solution required more than simply physically relocating people; it also required a profound change in the management of the unit. He sensed that he could use the opportunity to improve attitudes and management styles. The dedicated and appropriate office space could enable new networks to emerge, "success stories" to spread, other types of management and leadership to develop, and governance to change. The director worked with internal consultants to respond to his questions and anxieties, and they called in an external consultant. An informal network created many years earlier that focused on change and human relations reappeared, with one consultant in particular playing a key role.

The director came to better understand the major challenges facing his team. In response, he decided to install change agents chosen from inside and outside the organization, which was against the grain of the company's traditional engineering culture. The atmosphere in the senior management team changed drastically. As the leader now says: "We are carrying out a profound cultural change. With amazement and probably interest too, the rest of our large group is watching what is happening before their own eyes."

4. Sharpen Socioperceptive Awareness of the Region, Field of Action, or Target

Some of our interviewees recounted stories of successful learning initiatives, in which understanding the environment in which they act and effective ways of interacting with it are central.

Example 11. Several of our respondents are penetratingly socioperceptive. Given a task, they understand where their field of action calls for radically new forms of intervention, and they innovate. A middle manager was assigned a relatively new and unusual task. He was not driven by a desire for change or openness, but he did want to succeed in his assignment. He sensed how the population he had to work with differed from the populations his company usually dealt with. He strengthened his natural socioperceptive skill with Rogerian training. After some fumbling, he came to understand how and why standard methods and procedures wouldn't be effective in this case and invented radically new approaches adapted to the problem and population. In particular, he managed to develop a sense of belonging in a disparate population, so that a collective process of learning began. In the company, his success attracted attention and encouraged others to emulate his approach.

Example 12. Several companies are supporting their staffs in developing a practice of systematically listening to development trends. Some interviewees complained about their companies' inadequacies in this area.

Example 13. In a large company facing strong international competition, customer-service staff members sought to include the customer in their approach to innovation. To do so, they created feedback loops, such as "customer needs/suitability of products" loops. The question arises of whether this kind of practice can be formalized without killing the vitality at the root of this innovation. Can what is good in one case be good in another? *How can the organization codify and disseminate these emergent and spontaneous innovations?* The issue is not resolved and probably won't be soon, but it has launched a learning pathway. Can companies accept trial and error as a modern management procedure? How can they disseminate "success stories"?

Example 14. Some companies seek to identify forms of social suffering and to understand their

origins so as to find appropriate solutions. This practice can lead to the creation of foundations.

Example 15. Several of the companies we visited are working to analyze successes and failures that are out of the ordinary. One of them has systematized the process, developing methods and teams to examine successes and failures "post-mortem" and learn lessons that may be useful for other services or circumstances. Some of them conduct debriefs afterward: what worked well or not so well? What should we do next time?

Example 16. One of our respondents expressed an anxiety that seems to be general: How can we adapt our vision of the company's development to take into account permanent changes in the environment? One response is that we must listen and constantly readjust.

5. Personal Development and Transformation of Mental Models

We noticed that all of the companies dedicate enormous effort toward personal development, whether openness of mind, transmission of systemic perception, enrichment of intuition, ability to move from implicit to explicit, training of high-potential managers, or expansion of senior managers' general knowledge. Did this effort pre-date SoL, does it exist in parallel to SoL, or is it related to SoL's role in these companies?

This question is not easy to answer, and yet it is an important part of the learning pathway. Several of our interviewees who are internal change agents have had training in psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, ethnology, etc. They have a real desire for personal development, as shown by their participation in specialized seminars and their reading of books like *The Fifth Discipline* or more recently *Presence* by Otto Scharmer. They present diagrams illustrating the parallel between organizational development and personal development. They highlight work on listening (based on the approach developed by American psychologist Carl Rogers), constructive dialogue, and inter-relationships.

All of the companies return to the need to transform mental models. These transformations take place in informal or formal groups, such as research and dialogue groups oriented toward progress. Corporate universities also play an important role. Most companies organize personal development seminars. For several, the “Fundamentals of Organizational Learning” seminar has assumed a major role in disseminating learning across internal networks. This program centers on personal development in conjunction with teamwork, mental models, and the quality of dialogue. One company focuses all its management training for high-potential employees on the parallels between the construction of a strategic vision and the personal development of everyone in the organization, integrating body, heart, and mind.

6. Strategies That Are Changing, Contradictory, or Paradoxical

The interviews provided insights into the strategies of the companies concerned and their evolution over time. Field research with a broader scope than this project will no doubt show that all companies have strategies that are contradictory for the dimensions open/closed, participation/hierarchy, catalyze/lead, or learn on your own/be taught. Interviews with pragmatic, humanist change agents highlight a few of these contradictions.

Successive periods of tension and relaxation

We make an effort. It pays off. We feel entitled to relax. The situation starts to deteriorate. We step up the effort again. And so on. Several companies reported this pattern, which concerns learning networks in particular.

Example 17. Managers realized that top-down interventions in their company were of limited effectiveness. To involve all relevant staff and improve their fit with current realities in the field, the organization created learning networks. These networks achieved better and better success. The situation improved markedly. The question then came up: What do we really do in such networks? To save time, the company reduced their importance. Then they suppressed them altogether. The

situation deteriorated again, prompting restoration of the networks (sometimes in another form or under another name). The company again seeks to reach cruising speed.

Succession of different strategies suited to different times

Example 18. In recent decades, a particularly organic, living company streamlined its organization and “tightened the bolts.” This policy caused stress and discomfort among the staff. Senior managers responded by creating a communications and human resources policy that some staff and managers viewed as manipulative. Faced with a crisis, the company experienced a loss of cohesion and resilience. Some of its departments may be looking for ways to revive bottom-up initiatives.

Example 19. One company changes its CEO approximately every three years. This turnover results in strategic changes. This lack of continuity is not necessarily harmful. A detailed analysis may show that the change or adjustment of strategy depends both on the personality of the CEO and on changes in the status of the company in its environment.

Different strategies carried out by different levels and sectors of a company

Example 20. In many companies, two contradictory processes coexist that remain permanently in balance. One is an official centralizing, hierarchical “bolt-tightening” process, mandated and led by those in high places. The other is a set of fragmentary processes of openness and innovation that can be felt at different decentralized levels. Pragmatic, humanist change agents, more or less on their own initiative, represent different strategies from those championed by the company’s directors. In several cases, senior managers became aware of this phenomenon and encouraged it.

Example 21. Many companies have a policy of rationalization and centralization on the international level, while national leadership implements a policy of openness and innovation. About 10



years ago in one such organization, contradictions emerged between the executive committee and various national directorates. The system eventually moved toward openness and vitality. The executive committee now uses the words “learning organization.”

Example 22. Communication is sometimes used as a lubricant or a way to pass down the “gospel” according to senior management, and sometimes as an incentive and a way to develop awareness. In many companies, clashes arise between these different perspectives. For example, in one company, the communications department struggled to understand and incorporate initiatives from other departments. Turf wars began among the communications department, human resources, and strategy management. Some of our respondents posed the question: *“How do you send a management wake-up call in the 21st century?”*

Paradoxical strategies. Some companies deliberately run concurrent strategies that have different objectives and can appear contradictory.

Example 23. One company went through a phase of extreme decentralization and openness that initiated a paradigm shift in the culture, but also resulted in disturbances and loss of strategic coherence. The new president had to decide whether to go with centralization or openness. He chose a strategy of *and not or*: The organiza-

tion must centralize and tighten to restore consistency *and* multiply and strengthen its learning networks.

Example 24. Many companies react to crisis by seeking to reduce costs by involving staff in identifying potential savings and in researching the direction of post-crisis development. This is how they try to come out of the crisis alive, while strengthening their cohesion and resilience.

In one such company, contrary to the practice of the parent corporation, the director of an international division attempted to turn employees into “entrepreneurs.” The operation appears to have been successful.

On the orders of its parent entity, another particularly lively and socioperceptive company that devotes energy and time to its social and human functioning began a cost-cutting operation. Personnel numbers dropped, and workloads increased. The staff had less time to spend on social and human affairs or on planning for the future. However, facilitators organized interactive sessions focused on giving new life to the organization. They are groping...

All of the examples in this article show the extreme variety of possible pathways. This variety represents the essence of learning in practice. ■

FEATURE 11.1-2

Practicing Learning in All Its Forms

We are interested in the learning practices used by SoL member companies over the last 10 years for several reasons. First, they make visible the companies' intentions, principles, and theories. Also, practices can be described, with their progress, results, and effects. We asked the following questions:

- What are the practices?
- What are their characteristics?
- What are they fed by?
- What is innovative about these practices compared to other participatory approaches?

1. Characteristics of the Practices

As we listened to our interviewees, they described a set of learning practices.

The collective dimension

The focal point of learning practices is that they must be collective. The group is not merely a juxtaposition of people. The interactions among people create a place of learning. Learning together is not an end in itself. The act of learning can serve causes, such as developing a customer culture, opening up local fiefdoms, and developing a shared strategic vision. Groups concerned with learning vary widely. We distinguish existing de facto collectives in the organization from those created specially for an action as part of an organizational learning initiative.

Existing teams

The hierarchical organization of companies creates spaces where teams can come into being and grow. For example, using a learning approach, the managing director and executive committee can build a shared strategic vision and path to achieve it.

On its own initiative, the executive committee could also engage in an approach based on group learning (e.g., by asking managers, "What do we collectively need to learn to achieve our strategic goals?") or on individual apprenticeships. The group could also step back and look at the relationship between the managing director and his or her team by starting a direct dialogue (without using a standard 360-degree questionnaire).

Working groups

To facilitate openness between business activities, increase efficiency, and solve problems by bringing together the right skills at the right level (usually in the field), management can create working groups. The Kaisen method based on quality is one process that can support this kind of learning, as it develops collective learning as part of the drive for continuous improvement.



Learning networks

Learning networks bring together people working in the same area or carrying out the same operational or functional activity (with all ranks together). Volunteers participating in these networks decide collectively what concrete issues or priorities they will work on together. After trial runs, they make proposals to sponsors who have line authority to decide whether to implement them on a larger scale. In these learning networks, employees take the initiative and make decisions that would have been impossible in the ordinary company structure.

Communities of practice

Another collective learning practice is the exchange of best practices among peers in the same business activity through communities of practice or dialogue workshops. These are not clubs that invite guests to attend a panel discussion followed by dinner. A community of practice focuses on describing practices within a peer group. This process requires accepting that you don't know everything, revealing your weaknesses to and accepting help from others.

In learning networks, employees take the initiative and make decisions that would have been impossible in the ordinary company structure.

Customer days

To develop a customer culture, some people set up meetings that include clients. In some cases, the customer is internal to the company, in others, external. These customer days are designed for participants to discover, be surprised, and learn about each other and themselves. They are intended to trigger new awareness, changed attitudes, and action plans.

The individual dimension

Most of the time, individual learning occurs through the group process.

A craft. We refer to learning practices as “artisanal” for several reasons. First, they involve “tinkering” in the best sense of the term. People engage in clever ways to adapt the means at hand to create an effective approach to the current context. This does not involve reinventing the wheel every time but it does avoid industrializing the method, which bothers some large companies that seek to improve returns by multiplying certain approaches on a large scale. Learning is also a craft because the apprenticeship for acquiring the skills takes time and requires a lot of humility. By “skills,” we mean intuitions stemming from experience, such as knowing when to seize the moment to advance by trial and error (letting go), when to be directional (steering), when to introduce disorder, how to launch a call for volunteers, etc.

Some companies have invested in developing meeting spaces that create a suitable environment for accelerating openness to other departments or companies, to the outside world, to art.

Exceptional or recurring practices. Sometimes, the spirit of learning percolates through the entire function, department, steering committee, or company as a whole. In such cases, the practice of learning becomes a daily exercise. However, most of the practices described correspond to exceptional events, for two main reasons:

- The group forms for the occasion or an existing group (for example, a steering committee) decides to focus on an unusual subject.
- The need for action exists over a limited period of time: six months, a year, two to four years. For periods of more than a year, the approach often persists, but the players change (e.g., in learning networks).

An ad hoc space. Learning practices usually take place in ad hoc locations. In practical terms, people are not clustered around computers, Power-

Point presentations, or even tables. They often sit on chairs, maybe in a circle. When participants produce written material, they use paper or poster board. (A recent development is the practice of graphic recording; the graphic recorder draws or expresses graphically what is being said or experienced, without ironic cartooning, on large whiteboards that everyone can see.) Some companies have invested in developing meeting spaces that create a suitable environment for accelerating openness to other departments or companies, to the outside world, to art.

A state of mind. Our interviewees emphasized the importance of state of mind in learning practices. For them, this is what gives life to the use of practices, tools, and approaches.

Participants describe this mood as including:

- Curiosity and questioning
- Openness to others and to novelty
- The desire to learn
- Recognition of one’s own fragility
- Advantage for the group

Free circulation. Tools, methods, approaches, and theoretical references are in free circulation, and also free in the sense that no one is selling a method or franchise. This model is similar to the Linux experiment of open-source software. Participants in the circulation of resources include universities (American, Finnish, French), the companies themselves (such as the inter-company group of SoL members), books, magazines (*Reflections* edited by SoL United States, and the *Cahiers de SoL France*), associations (the GARF – human resources professionals; the CJD – young business leaders), civil society (participatory democracy), learning journeys (Team Academy Finland), and consultants.

2. Uses

Learning often serves change management. Its practice can contribute to managerial transformation through the development of cooperation, delegation, accountability, and leadership. Learning practices focus on three issues: the



process and conditions for success, interactions, and diversity.

Processes and conditions for success

Learning practices focus first and foremost on the processes and conditions for success: the “how.” The “what” is input by the participants. In starting a learning approach, one of the first questions is: “How can we establish the conditions for successfully learning together?” Some of the many conditions include openness, dialogue, creativity, and a proactive orientation.

Interactions

Learning practices center primarily on interactions. This means taking account of the system, its complexity, and its dynamics, and noticing the interactions among these components. It means arranging meetings between people (the World Café is a landmark approach). Learning in this context consists of dialogue rather than top-down communication or propaganda.

Through the processes of observation, research, and action, the observer also becomes an actor and researcher.

Learning practices rely on the diversity of the people present and their different perceptions and points of view.

Diversity

Practices of learning may involve different kinds of resources:

- The imaginary and the analogical (the Research Café)
- Cartesian analysis, rational thought (associated with quality programs)
- Systemic analysis (scenarios)
- “Storytelling” at learning tables

This last practice has nothing to do with the spin techniques used by politicians and their marketers to rewrite history in their favor. In the storytelling used with learning tables, participants relate both failures and successes in order to transmit experiences in all their aspects and make progress through the support of the group.

Learning practices rely on the diversity of the people present and their different perceptions and points of view:

- Different line management levels, as in learning networks
- Different businesses, particularly for participatory innovation
- Different backgrounds and cultures, for example, a “learning journey” in China organized for French participants

Learning practices may seem subversive to many players in the company because they pose in-depth questions about power, change, and life.

3. What Is New About These Practices Compared to Participatory Approaches?

The innovation here lies in the combination of three practices: parity, a systemic process, and reflexivity.

Parity

Parity is:

- the use of peer groups (groups in the same profession or function), and
- the establishment of groups from different professions or different levels for the duration of the action, enabling them to experience new forms of cooperation.

Systemic process

In participatory approaches, a systemic process consists of establishing an anchor in the organization through analysis of interactions, organizations, dynamics, reservoirs, regulators, feedback loops, and the use of process-related, rather than content-related, interventions.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity consists of a process of action research: observing oneself acting in the system with others, and developing skills in group observation and action in and with the group. Participants often make these observations explicit and share them in conversations on the subject (feedback) but also throughout the process.

To conclude, learning practices serve to:

- transform links where they are damaged or distorted;
- create links where there are few or none;
- displace power, allow countervailing powers to develop, and share power differently;
- achieve objectives more effectively;
- catalyze emergent factors.

These are not necessarily revolutionary practices, in the sense that they fit well and truly into the company and do not seek to destroy it or expel shareholders. As far as we have observed, learning practices include acceptance of the capitalist system. Nevertheless, they may seem subversive to many players in the company because they pose in-depth questions about power, change, and life. They are in fact based on a number of tenets:

- Collective intelligence is central.
- Learning means changing.
- Life is about learning.
- The world is changing.
- Human beings are valuable in themselves.

Last point: Did our interviewees seem satisfied with the results of their learning experiences?

We can tentatively conclude that the results are sometimes spectacular, but they are fragile and difficult to maintain over time, especially when this type of approach is not part of the company's DNA.

The section on change agents will give further insight into the issues and struggles represented by these kinds of learning approaches. ■

A Particular Type of Change Agent

During our investigation into learning in companies, we identified people who play a key role. They are vehicles for the momentum of change and stimulate organizational transformation, hence the term “change agents.” We could try to compile a portrait of a typical change agent, but these are not standard types. Each person has an individual profile, describing his or her personal and professional career, company, and business culture. To respect the wide variety in their profiles while highlighting what characterizes and distinguishes them, we will use six different spotlights to present change agents from six different angles:

- The means through which they emerge and multiply
- Their ability to act as “pragmatic humanists”
- Their internal make-up and the type of leadership they embody
- The particular characteristics of their personal journeys
- The limitations of navigating by sight
- An outline of their evolution

The portraits will overlap, hopefully providing enough nuances and differences in emphasis to avoid simplistic clichés.

Spotlight Number One: The Emergence of Change Agents in the Company

Early in our research, we had discussions with people close to SoL who we knew would be major sources of information about learning as it occurred in their own companies. *What we did not know is that change agents are part of a growing current.* Indeed, these people referred to others who had played a role in developing their awareness of being change agents. They encouraged us to contact people with the same profile, who in turn mentioned others. Sometimes the very fact that we listened to people made them aware that they too were change agents, that they were more typical than they thought, and that others were part of the same dynamic.

Sometimes the very fact that we listened to people made them aware that they too were change agents.

We came to consider the emergence of change agents as a major feature of the past 10 years. Almost all of our interviewees seek something other than professional success. In their companies, as they carry out projects, they strive to exceed the operational objectives assigned to them. They want to provide something extra that will benefit individuals, teams, and possibly the company and even the planet. *They propel change in the direction of improvement, openness, self-fulfillment, and well-being.* They are guided by the intention of giving meaning to work, and they develop a storyline that makes sense to them and to those with whom they work.

Their numbers have grown over the years. They create links and connections through discrete, informal networks that continually branch out. In some cases, these change agents are limited to the scope of their companies; in others, they step beyond the boundaries of the organization, country, or field of activity. Some act as links between people in different levels of management or with varying degrees of seniority but who share a commitment. Others identify themselves as professional change agents commissioned by the company to drive and lead change.

One question to ask is whether a sleeping change agent exists in each of us.

This multiplication of change agents in companies that differ widely in size, business, culture, and nationality is unmistakable. It reflects people's need to do good and to create conditions to achieve this goal, whether senior managers in their companies are aware of it or not.

We can distinguish three types of change agent:

- Those who are "active propagators" by conviction
- Those who are "propagators active" because it is their job
- Those who are "passive propagators"

These last individuals sometimes drift along for a considerable period before becoming aware of the need to do good around them. One question to ask is whether a sleeping change agent exists in each of us. The world is increasingly unpredictable – for companies and for the planet – and a jolting that makes us lose our balance could very well awaken that dormant impulse. From passive transmitters, these propagators could become increasingly active, and their attitude could gradually become the majority view. Some companies might also be tempted to adopt the appearance of supporting change agents just to blend in with the times.

The proliferation of change agents and their impact over recent years seems in any case a significant sociological phenomenon.

Spotlight Number Two: The Integration of Humanism and Pragmatism

To humanists, what is important is developing humanity's qualities; to pragmatists, what is important is what works. The two views are often contrasted. Change agents characteristically integrate the two. They seek to create, here and now, realistic conditions that contribute to an efficient company and also serve to develop the people working there. They seek to develop the company and its people, leading us to describe them as "pragmatic humanists." They are constantly looking for business solutions that respect the dignity of human beings. These change agents face a number of all-pervasive concerns:

- How can we give meaning to people's jobs?
- How can we release the vitality of the people working in the company?
- How can we be bold and move forward without losing people's confidence?

Here are some specific issues we have identified and the answers our contacts provided.

1. How can we associate people's development with the development of the company?

One of our interviewees set himself the task of changing the mindset of his company's executive committee, marked by a "left-brain" engineering culture that emphasized predictability and security through a static representation of the business system. He set up a seminar on "right-brain" thinking, with particular emphasis on systemic approaches, awareness of movement, and dynamic interactions, to expand people's frame of reference and encourage innovation. By starting with senior managers, he expects this cultural evolution to trickle down to the other levels of the company. Another participant emphasized that his aim was to give a group of 300 people the idea that they can choose their destiny and achieve it. He had become director of a production site that was in decline and renovated the plant



while offering staff an interesting future. “It’s part of my dream to help people build their future,” he said.

2. How can we open new spaces of responsibility for employees?

In one company, the executive committee and the union representatives worked jointly to create a new forum to maintain a constructive social dialogue. Our interviewee reported: “We manage to get around a table regularly, once a month, on negotiations, wage structures, working hours, health and safety, planned management of jobs and careers, continuing education, sustainable development.... All of this has palpable results, and the group has developed people-oriented values.... Companies can still have ethical concerns while making a profit, as long as they put people at the heart of the matter and respect not only safety rules but also human values.”

The practice of transformations goes hand in hand with the transformation of practices.

3. How can we lead groups toward releasing their capacities for productivity, creativity, and performance?

For a significant number of our interviewees, the answer is linked to the reorganization of their approach. They have gotten used to leaving, at least temporarily, the cold classroom model where a knowledgeable authority dictates to those who don’t know the content. Instead, these change agents now ensure the exchange of ideas by mixing people and points of view in a setting that is closer to that of a village café than to a classroom, where everyone discusses the issues of the day and interacts as a team, freely and spontaneously.

4. How can we encourage acceptance of the idea that working in groups gives better results in the end even if it can be more time consuming than working autonomously?

To varying degrees, our interviewees have all absorbed the principles of collaborative organization. They have learned to create events impelled by group dynamics that bring together tens or even hundreds of employees. Each time, they have to convince supporters of more conventional corporate events who are afraid of creating situations and provoking ideas that they can't control. In the daily life of the company, the interviewees employ a vocabulary reflecting the learning principles that underlie their activities. The practice of transformations goes hand in hand with the transformation of practices. People more and more frequently speak of "co-creation," "co-development," or "co-activation." The use of these neologisms makes it easy for change agents to recognize each other.

The spaces between different organizational levels are not voids; they are alive, connected, irrigated by currents that circulate forward and backward, from smallest to largest and largest to smallest.

The pragmatic humanists we met do not try to convince people by discussing ideas. They use situations and provide experiences. Rather than seeking to prove something, they make people find out for themselves. Lived, positive experiences link the twin imperatives of pragmatism and humanism. Change agents build experiences one after the other, creating gateways that lead mechanistic logic and execution to evolve toward the logic of living cooperation, animated by the spirit of collective intelligence.

**Spotlight Number Three:
The C + C + C Structure and Leadership**

A three-pillared structure is reflected in change agents' personalities, decisions, and actions: Collective, Consciousness, and Consistency.

1. The change agent and "collectives"

In the company, change agents always link the individual with the group or groups to which they belong. They take account of "the person-who-is-in-the-team-in-the-group-in-the-department-in-the-company-in-the-environment-in-society-in-the-world-of-Planet-Earth." The spaces between different organizational levels are not voids; they are alive, connected, irrigated by currents that circulate forward and backward, from smallest to largest and largest to smallest. The boundaries are porous. As complexity theory suggests, we can see feedback loops in which the individual acts on the group, which in turn affects the individual. This is a continuous process of co-evolution.

In some of the companies, we observed that this trend had led to the existence of groups of change agents who create ripple effects toward shifts that are necessary or desirable for the company. The change agents at the heart of such collectives see their influence multiply, and while they shed some of their aura of solitary heroes, they gain in impact what they lose in romantic appeal. This marked affinity for the "collective" – the people around me, the other in front of me, the individuals whose existence matters to me even if I hardly know them – is reflected in many ways. We will try to let the individuals speak for themselves.

First, change agents show a spontaneous, natural ability to feel the dynamics of what is being lived around them. They are often natural systemic specialists, as if they have radar that gives them a delicate grasp of how interactions are working. When this is not the case, experience quickly leads them to acquire this skill, essential to the introduction of non-directive organizational change. Such people are particularly at ease working across functions. One of the people we interviewed emphasized that French corporate culture is better adapted

to these changes than American business culture, which is formalized by job descriptions with strict boundaries.

This environmental sensitivity enables change agents to preserve the living elements of the systems in which they work. In a group, for example, they have a strong sense of the moods, tensions, and fluctuations in energy levels. These elements are extremely reliable indicators, even if they can't be physically measured. Thus, during a work session, change agents will know whether to clear up a misunderstanding by interrupting, scheduling a break, or raising the energy level with some well-chosen music. They are therefore in tune with the group in real time and not prisoners of a fixed blueprint. The people themselves provide the information that guides the change agents to choose the right action in real time.

This group sense serves the needs of organizational learning, as we will see from numerous examples. For a learning group to come to life, the members must feel that they belong. For instance, our interviewees reported that when they participated in training sessions in other countries, factors such as language, culture, history, prejudice about dominant and subordinate positions, and material difficulties could derail the process of mobilizing group intelligence. As one of our interviewees put it, *"Without belonging, there is no learning."*

Change agents also express this group sense in the vitality of their networking. They know how to connect with new people and mesh easily with their contacts' contacts. They have a taste for "living together" associated with an optimistic outlook for the planet. All of them enthusiastically mentioned a journey, learning expedition, repeated stays in the same country, or exploration of a new population as playing an important role in their development. And they find new resources in meetings of international networks, which in a few hours allow the weaving of a novel social fabric on a global scale. Finally, the description "socio-

perceptive" seems to summarize the taste and know-how that committed change agents develop (see Part 2, "Empathy, Socioperception, and Anticipation").

In a company where the motto is "act like a man of thought and think like a man of action," change agents add the dimension of the heart.

2. What do we mean by "consciousness"?

Change agents have generally developed a high awareness of who they are (self-awareness), how they operate, and what impact they have on others. They know each other well, are capable of self-analysis, and are clear about their reasoning, desires, beliefs, feelings, and emotions. Knowing themselves well, they do not stand in their own light. They are comfortable with making contact, getting to know people, and encouraging interactions. It is striking to see how easily change agents connect with each other and how rapidly they are able to start a conversation on a deep subject. That is how they expand their networks: They are born connectors.

They are also able to communicate clearly. They know how to say "I." Faced with emotions, whether the bitterness or anger that are usually masked and sweetened (referred to as "frustration"), or joy and enthusiasm, they know where they stand. As one of them commented: "In some cases, you must know how to exclude a guy from the team if he has gone too far." Not falsely objective, they know what motivates them on both rational and emotional levels. Being aware of who they are, they have a capacity for empathy that serves their projects. When they seek to recruit others, they perceive characters accurately. Thus one of them talks about identifying skills and temperaments: "You have to see if their character is bitter or generous."

3. “Coherence,” the choice of authenticity

Change agents feel the need to align thinking, feeling, and action, i.e., brain, heart, and body, more than others. In a company where the motto is “act like a man of thought and think like a man of action,” they add the dimension of the heart. This gives them a special energy. Driven by the desire and need to be consistent, authentic, and morally honest with themselves in their choice of actions, they often seem to “have faith.” We see change agents take responsibility for difficult projects for which they lack the necessary means at first, but in which they believe, for example, creating a system of training in entrepreneurship from scratch, or starting a completely new project that has to be operational at short notice. They are often distinguished by their courage and generosity. They take on tasks that others would consider demeaning, such as spending several hours at night sticking stamps on postcards to participants in the last seminar. They are willing to give a lot to feed the connection.

We see change agents as those who guide, not by promoting themselves, but by bringing forward the latent intent of the group.

These change agents work for the long term, with patience and constancy. Developing learning initiatives becomes a bit of a mission for them. To abandon it would be to deny themselves. One of our interviewees was about to refuse an attractive offer from a headhunter until learning that the position included responsibility for developing large-scale learning networks.

Change agents are also able to persist at critical moments when their passionate side makes the difference. This is often what gives them the capacity to radiate power and enthusiasm. They can hang in there when the winds are contrary; they don’t do anything that could hamper a better

future. They know how to wait while remaining true to the learning that is being brought into existence, which sometimes requires them to keep a low profile. On the downside, they can also be carried along by their own momentum, taking risks or appearing to be irresponsible or rebellious.

4. Change agents as leaders

To end this first part, it seems appropriate to combine the three Cs and ask what style of leadership change agents practice. Surely not the style most commonly used as a reference, which combines power, domination, domestication, and direction. The leadership style embodied by change agents is shaped by their values and specific skills. We can sketch out what distinguishes the standard leadership attitude from the leadership offered by a change agent:

- Openness to others and sensitivity to difference rather than selection and judgment
- Inclusion rather than division and hierarchy
- Inspiration, influence, and raising awareness rather than control
- Intention to encourage growth rather than desire to enforce execution
- Attitude of catalyzing the desired emergences

We naturally need to further develop this sketch. *Nevertheless, we see change agents as those who guide, not by promoting themselves, but by bringing forward the latent intent of the group.*

Spotlight Number Four: Personal Stories That Matter

As everyone knows, career paths are composed of initial training, technical skills, and professional experience. Sometimes, with regard to management positions, the behavioral dimension completes the package. Change agents are good professionals in every respect, including training, professional skills, and experience. But they have something more: They have a personal journey that they integrate with their professional role, contributing to its specific character and richness. These paths are not preconfigured because they do not correspond to any school except the “school

of life.” We have however identified some common denominators:

- The comprehensive study of disciplines that are not directly related to their profession
- The practice of an artistic or physical discipline
- An affiliation
- Active participation in civil society

1. The comprehensive study of disciplines that are not directly related to their profession

The humanities, life sciences, and earth interest change agents; they devote considerable time and energy to their study. Whatever their initial training, through this practice, change agents grow and help others to grow. Among the disciplines they feed on directly or indirectly, we have identified:

- Applied psychology, particularly the approaches and techniques from the Palo Alto school (Rogerian listening, communication, and change), approaches to personal development, family therapy including systemic analysis and complexity theory, and all the techniques related to “brief therapy”
- Social sciences such as sociology, anthropology, and ethnology

Change agents do not advance with flying colors and proclamations or programs; they work to change things only when the moment is ripe.

- Life sciences such as biology, ecology, the neurosciences, and disciplines related to the study of cognition and behavior
- Developments in communication sciences
- Philosophy and the history of ideas and social movements
- Science education with particular interest in non-directive teaching

Change agents are characterized by intellectual freedom and a pioneering spirit that draws them to a range of interdisciplinary resources, such as research on the human brain and its intersection with ethics. They are also particularly receptive to a direct approach to these disciplines. While they do not neglect the abstract and conceptual dimension, they also like to study in small groups whose real-time exchanges enrich their studies.





2. The practice of an artistic or physical discipline

Change agents often draw nourishment from a discipline: visual arts; music through playing an instrument, singing, or participating in a choir; theater; dance; writing. In their attitudes, one can see the role played by regularly training in a martial art or a technique based on the flow of vital energy. For them, these activities bring intellect, senses, body, and spirit into unison.

3. Affiliation

These change agents are often bearers of a moral heritage, either as part of a personal affiliation or through a spiritual practice that guides and inspires them. As a result, they hold a vision rooted in the past that they can project far into the future. Short-term obsessions or emergencies do not affect this long-term view.

4. Active participation in civil society

We also noted that apart from their work, change agents often actively engage in civil society as social innovators, members or leaders of asso-

ciations or NGOs, leaders or active members of professional associations or communities, local elected officials, coaches of sports teams, teachers, and so on.

Spotlight Number Five: Navigating by Sight So As to Seize Opportunities

Change agents navigate according to the current climate in their companies. If a senior line manager takes an action or utters an opinion that offers an opportunity for developing the company's collective intelligence, change agents seize the moment. Obviously, if a senior manager who lacks interest in the company's human capital parachutes into high office, or if strategy once more gives absolute priority to short-term financial results, they have no alternative but to wait for better times. Change agents do not advance with flying colors and proclamations or programs; they work to change things only when the moment is ripe. The opportunity is often quite accidental, to be seized on the fly. *Change agents are acrobats of emergence.*

We have seen how, on meeting someone or at an event, these individuals feel compelled to act in the interests of their companies, especially if it is a living company. If they suddenly find themselves confronted with a task for which there is no institutionalized response, they make use of the opportunity presented by this management vacuum. By exercising their ability to act quickly and mobilize dormant networks, they assume leadership. Even without planning, such experiences become progressively more important in their lives.

Change agents learn how to transfer solutions and amplify them in other situations. They remain aware of passing opportunities and the need for patience, remain steadfast in their vision, and seize the advantages offered. Then they decompartmentalize, move the boundaries, and build bridges between the shop floor and the top of the hierarchy. They can do so with discretion or in public. For example, 200 people attended a seminar on collective intelligence where a public debate took place between the secretary general of the union at a large chemical group and the CEO of a world-wide tourist company. The CEO was also the son of a former French president; during the president's term, the secretary general had been one of the leaders of a long and highly publicized strike.

To try to ensure that they have room to maneuver, change agents reconfigure their position, its scope, and sometimes its title in an attempt to escape from the prison of nomenclature. We have found the following titles used for change agents: director of knowledge management; director of crisis communications and sustainable development; director of advanced technology; director of sales, training, and development; and director of transformation. We also noticed a number of titles that cloud the issue; for example, adviser to the president or internal consultant. When change agents temporarily feel secure in their positions, they wait for a signal that allows them to go further, make their work more visible, and give it wider scope. This process formalizes their approach and sometimes produces a wave of in-house conver-

sions, with internal communication picking up the message and its themes. Recent converts are usually eloquent ambassadors. *But what matters to the change agents is that the practices they have introduced grow and spread.*

We are interested to see if the storm warnings accompanying the current economic crisis give these leaders more opportunities to exercise their navigational talents.

Spotlight Number Six: Sketch of Evolution over Time

Over the years, change agents live through career fluctuations that are difficult to foresee. Nothing is ever guaranteed at the institutional level. They report that promoting social change and innovation does not necessarily advance their careers. However, the opposite tendency also exists, and when a company identifies the dynamics of transformation as a strategic imperative, leaders call on change agents to supply their expertise. More and more, companies recruit people and appoint them to key functions precisely because they are change agents and have certain abilities. These include the abilities to:

- hear weak signals rustling through the company and give them a voice;
- bring people together and express things in a way that reflects the voice of the majority and not an arrogant overview; and
- lead by inspiring, not commanding.

The most explicit example we found was the appointment of a "director of transformation" in a company that for a decade had undertaken a major technological, economic, and cultural change. We discreetly observed a meeting of major players in the change effort. Prompted by the most convinced change agent, the parties discussed their respective approaches and confirmed their alliance. The gathering was called the "Pirate Meeting," a reference to the pirate radio stations of the early 1980s that initiated a revolution in France's audiovisual landscape. Humorous reference or intuitive forecast? Time will tell. ■

FEATURE 11.1-2

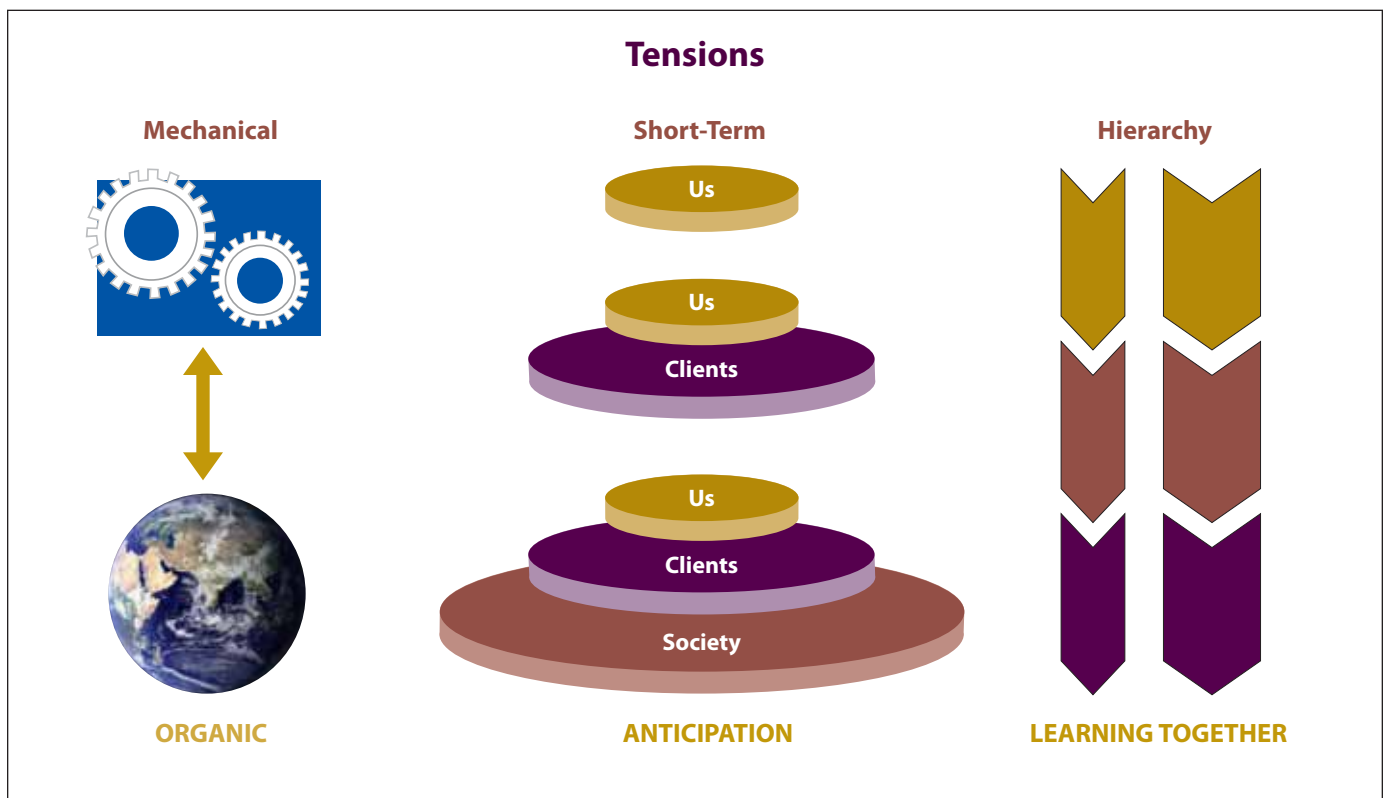
Companies Stretched Between Two Poles

1. Two Poles

When we looked for a meaningful way of classifying the companies where we conducted our interviews, we found that we can map them between two opposing poles: a mechanistic, short-term pole of rationalized efficiency and maximized profits, and a pole of organic behavior with short-term complexity and profitable growth over time. We also identified a movement, rather than a tension, between hierarchical perception and organizational learning. We observed that the introduction of learning helps to reduce the weight of hierarchical thought, in that top management is no longer the sole authority for spreading knowledge or constructing projects in the company (see figure below).

2. What Makes Change Agents Run?

What impels change agents and what are they after in these companies drawn between two opposing poles of business life? Their goal is to support the company in taking effective action. They want to move or accompany the company in shifting toward living, organic behavior patterns and away from



mechanical, automated thinking. Change agents are convinced that taking account of complexity, promoting learning, and searching for social cohesion are the best ways to improve the company's health. In a society that has emphasized individual development, they help to create space and time for emergent, non-directional collective experiences. We have also confirmed that change agents' central role is to influence the interactions among people, functions, and the internal organization of their companies.

3. Companies That Tolerate, Promote, and Enhance

We discovered by listening to change agents that the companies where they operate tolerate them, encourage them, and promote their value. These three verbs are important. In some cases, without understanding exactly what is going on, the bosses and company culture trust the change agents and tolerate their proposed approaches to thinking and acting. We use the word "tolerate," as leaders leave a parallel space for these efforts alongside the hierarchy, outside the strategic and operational functioning of the company. Some human resources and communications departments approve of this approach because it does not disturb their ability to control what is said, thought, and transmitted.

In other cases, senior managers, human resources departments, and the company culture encourage the grafting of the learning approach onto the management process. This tactic may generate tension with some communications and human resources departments. An owner or senior manager may be a facilitator by nature. Strongly customer-oriented corporate cultures also tend to be decentralized and accept the disturbance of patterns, value of listening, and need for change. Other companies voluntarily create functions such as director of transformation. In some cases, the top leader inculcates the spirit of "learning together" throughout the company.

We discovered only one company that was not much interested in listening to what organizational learning is and how it works. This company allows rivalry to dominate over cooperation. The pressure for short-term results and company history were factors causing this inability to listen. Yet the company does have an open attitude to learning from and with customers, and from and with society. This company is fragmented.

To varying degrees, all the other companies were looking to give free rein to peer groups, find out what happens when people act together, and understand what they learn.

In some cases, the top leader inculcates the spirit of "learning together" throughout the company.

4. The Value for the Customer, Market, and Society in General

We have been talking about how companies act with regard to change agents and learning approaches within their own fabric. We were also surprised to hear change agents talk not only about the internal life of the company, but also about the company as seen from the outside: customers, markets, and society in general. Why did they raise this point with us? Because they know that being open to others drives efficiency, and because "the other" is for them a serious matter and not a tool or an instrument. Indeed, we found many examples of learning practices that relied on the client, that is to say a third party, in developing a way to get organized, share a goal, and work collectively and individually, but differently. Other examples involved participatory innovation, involving people from various positions *with the exception of* research and development.

All of the companies encourage this dimension of the “other” and the “client,” beginning relatively recently, depending on when they became open to competition, their types of customer (consumers or professionals), and whether they have a paternalistic culture. For some companies, organizational learning applies not only to employees, customers, and the market but also to society as a whole, in a relationship of mutual influence concerning topics such as health, nutrition, welfare, and ecology.

Companies in the process of developing an organic vision of themselves come to see that the hierarchical “pyramid-shaped logic” is no longer all there is.

5. Looking Ahead

We found the following phenomenon: When a company is seriously and explicitly interested in the interactions among employees, functions, and departments and has strong interactions with customers, markets, and society in general, then despite short-term pressures, it can often maintain this interest and continue its long-term deployment. The company looks ahead. It invests, innovates, remains focused on its values and mission, takes risks, tries things, and attracts young people.

6. Pyramid-Shaped Structures Are No Longer All There Is

We also found that companies in the process of developing an organic vision of themselves come to see that the hierarchical “pyramid-shaped logic” is no longer all there is. Employees become more adept at living in several structures at once, including the hierarchy of line management, peer groups, and inter-specialty networks. ■

Conclusion

Over the past 10 years, the pulsating network that has come into being around SoL France has contributed to the evolution of companies from a mechanistic logic toward an organic one.

1. Companies in Evolution

The eight companies that we investigated appear extremely different, but they are all moving and learning a better way to live. They are evolving. Senior managers are explicitly pushing along some of the shifts while others occur without a decision from anyone in authority. Opposing camps develop; some pulling one way and some another. The people we interviewed, actors who are more or less aligned with SoL, share a certain idea of their companies. They can't define it in a word, although they perceive the organization as a coherent whole that would be in opposition to any older conception of the company. These two concepts are the poles of a tension that likely exists today in a great many companies and that seems to be one of the energy sources driving the transformations under way. The trend is for change from a mechanistic logic to an organic logic.

Our action research throws some light on this tension, but to a limited extent. It sees through the eyes of certain categories of supporters of change: those who are after peaceful evolution. It leaves out other players in the strategic game, in particular:

- Partisans of change by forcible means, such as networks for dispute and/or blockage that exist in many large companies, trying to hinder their normal operation and create obstacles to reforms decided at the top or to instigate a "minimum service" complicity
- Proponents of stability, rational organization, hierarchy, centralization, and maximized short-term profit

Additional research is indispensable; unfortunately this project remains out of reach for SoL.

But however limited our action research may be, it shows that the categories of participants are not fixed. In light of the hopes, doubts, and discouragements that the interviews uncovered, we were able to imagine circumstances where agents acting for peaceful change might tilt toward blockages, disputes, or other circumstances

The company concept rejected by our interviewees: stability	The company concept shared by our interviewees: change
Rationalized organization	Living and learning organization
Mechanistic	Organic
Linear, logical thinking	Systemic thinking
Pyramid (hierarchy)	Participation, heterarchy, leadership
Direct, order	Catalyze, facilitate
Imposed views	Listening, giving birth, influencing
Control	Networking
Conformity	Discovery
Centralization	Interaction
Repetition	Emergence
Finance	Business activity, market
Short term	Vision, anticipation
Profit	Vitality, sustainable fulfillment

favoring the opposite movement. In the field, *we observed numerous cases where proponents of stability became open to change, but no cases of movement in the opposite direction.*

A manager's or employee's openness to change can spring from a variety of sources that may work together – a conversion, a book, or a seminar. The individual becomes suddenly aware that the company, branch, or division has no future if it continues down the road it has taken. He or she notices a growing split between the state of the company and the evolution of people and society. At the same time, the person discovers other ways of doing things, born of hesitantly groping action. The current economic crisis seems to be an accelerator of this shift.

The proponents of peaceful change we interviewed have a depreciatory image of the supporters of stability: They are mistaken; they don't understand; their mental models date from another age; they are hanging on to their scant power; they are obsessed by competition, finance, profitability, and so on.

We observed numerous cases where proponents of stability became open to change, but no cases of movement in the opposite direction.

Over the past 10 years, change agents, including managers, employees appointed to encourage change, and self-appointed mavericks, have become more numerous. And our action research shows just as clearly that the momentum has increased in recent years. Similarly, a tendency toward cooperation between managers and employees is developing. These observations confirm that the system has at the moment a definite orientation.

2. Change Agents Seem to Have a Particular Type of Personality

The change agents we interviewed are very different from each other, but all believe personally in the change they are introducing and feel themselves charged with a mission to transform the company. They share three personality traits: they are humanistic, pragmatic, and socioperceptive (a profile sometimes referred to as "HPS").

They are humanists in that they focus on the living human beings who are at the center of their actions. Their goal is the fulfillment of individuals and human societies. They are catalysts for building awareness of life, revitalizing emergence, and creating efficiency through fulfillment.

They are pragmatic, oriented toward taking action on current reality, seeking out what works effectively and what produces beneficial results for the company.

They are socioperceptive in that they have highly developed empathy and sensitivity toward individuals and interpersonal and social interactions. Faced with complex choices of actions, they are adept at keeping the balance between emotion and logic, intuition and rationality. As a result, they sense the dynamics of the systems within which they operate and the most advisable course to follow.

3. The Crisis As an Evolutionary Accelerator

The current economic crisis has swept aside all of the understanding that had become generally accepted in the economic and political establishment and among managers. The sacred position of financial and economic laissez faire has taken a heavy knock. Managers whose attention was firmly fixed on maximizing profitability are beginning to think about survival, preservation of essential strengths, avoidance or limitation of layoffs, sustainable development, radical re-engineering of activities, etc.

Opportunities for action are opening up in companies for those with HPS profiles. In this critical context, they may feel that their company needs them; the sudden vulnerability of old mental attitudes is opening the door to innovation and stimulating their imaginations. Because of their specific sensitivities, they are well placed to perceive emergent opportunities and imagine other forms of organization, management, motivation, markets, or production methods.

Several of the companies we studied are undertaking strategic research focused on “visions of the future, circumstances of now.” They are inventing action plans that aim both to make good the damage and strengthen the cohesion and resilience of their teams and to commit themselves to sustainable development as the basis for the company’s vitality and prosperity in the years ahead. Contrary to its dominant business culture, one company is calling for employees to initiate and participate in

In these companies, the idea is coming to fruition that they must combine economical and controlled steering with the drive to provide answers to the ills of staff, society, and the planet.

finding defenses against seriously downgraded market conditions. In another, management is working with staff and unions to organize the search for practical paths for evolving toward a decarbonized economy.

It appears to us that, in these companies, the idea is coming to fruition that they must combine economical and controlled steering with the drive to provide answers to the ills of staff, society, and the planet. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Among the SoL France company members participating in the action research were Bonduelle, Danone, Danfoss-Socla, France-Télécom-Orange, L’Oréal, SNCF, and Solvay.
- 2 Action research is a scientific research methodology founded by Kurt Lewin (*Field Theory in Social Science*, Harper and Row, 1951). It provides research techniques that allow real experiences to take place in natural social groups. These techniques are based on the idea that, in the context of sociological experimentation, research and action can be brought together within one and the same approach. Action research is founded on the idea that both human and social systems, as subjects for study, show specific characteristics that require the use of a different methodology from that employed in the so-called hard sciences: interiority, non-determinism, and singularity. It involves not only the actors taking part in the experiment but also the researcher who is conducting the research. This approach has encouraged the development of interview and observation techniques that nourish the researcher’s capacity for empathy.
- 3 June 9–11, 2009 in Fontainebleau, France
- 4 Our partners sometimes refer to other changes occurring in their companies that are directly opposite to what they themselves are after: centralization, rationalization of the organization, return to top-down attitudes, etc. This could be the subject of another study with a different research plan.
- 5 “Socioperception” is a term that Alain de Vulpian uses to sum up just about everything that’s different about the way we approach the world now, compared to how people did 60 years ago. It is a combination of reason, sensation, and emotion that is based in relationship and interrelationship. It goes beyond empathy to suggest a sense of “being among” that is profoundly anti-hierarchical, relatively compassionate, well attuned, intimate, innovative, and anticipative. Socioperception concerns our relationships with others, with society as a whole, with the physical environment, and with ourselves.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

After a career as director of the Centre de formation aux réalités internationales (CEFRI), an executive training center on international realities, **Irène Dupoux-Couturier** is now vice president and managing director of SoL France. By participating in this action research project, she hoped to understand to what extent phenomena that she had observed over the past 30 years in companies facing a changing world were now becoming the focus of their approach: a new type of management centered on people.

Catherine Redelsperger works in companies and associations to develop collaboration for handling complexity. Her participation in action research is fueled by her curiosity and the questions: “What are we talking about when we say ‘learning’?” and “What are the realities of companies faced with complexity and how can we look at the paths they follow?”

Béatrice Quasnik’s association with this action research project is an extension of her commitment to the transformations sweeping through our companies. A change support consultant and coach, she has been working with companies for the past 15 years to encourage the empowerment of people and groups working toward transformation.

Alain de Vulpian is a socio-anthropologist and the founder of Cofremca, RISC, and Sociovision. He has dedicated his professional life to conducting action research, observing the evolution of western societies, and designing humane interventions. His book *Towards the Third Modernity: How Ordinary People Are Transforming the World*, Triarchy Press, 2008, evokes this work. Since his retirement, Alain has continued to research topics of general interest. He is vice president of SoL France.

PART TWO

Getting It into Perspective

Learning in Light of Evolving Social Practices in France

CATHERINE REDELSPERGER AND BÉATRICE QUASNIK



Catherine
Redelsperger

Learning practices, like all social practices, can be linked to societal evolution. These practices have not been imposed from the outside and would never have been able to develop *ex nihilo*. They are transmitted by an underlying current that we will try to sketch out here by looking at six interconnected dynamics:

- Disappearance of barriers between professional and personal life
- Expression of the personality
- Reevaluation of the concept of “collective”
- The internet as creator of interactions
- Aspiration for more democracy
- Sustainable development



Béatrice Quasnik

Thus learning, as described in this issue, can resonate with other fields more familiar to the reader, whose effects stretch well beyond the world of work.

1. Disappearance of Barriers Between Professional and Private Life

Since the 1970s, we have seen “a degree of decompartmentalization between life at work and life outside work,” to quote Curie and Dupuy, researchers at the University of Toulouse.¹ They demonstrate that to understand the actors in an organization, you must take into account that they have several lives: family life, company life, and social life. In 1994, Curie and Dupuy showed a snapshot of this evolution over the past 40 years; they described the significant markers of this trend as follows:

- Growth in female employment, with the result that men and women are in each other’s company at work as well as in private life
- Flexibility in organizing everyday life: flexible working hours, choice of part-time work at certain stages of life, and so on
- Reduction of time spent at work
- Frequent switching between production and training because of the accelerated obsolescence of knowledge
- Less definition of social identity in terms of professional activity

- Demand for a smaller gap between the outside and the inside of the company regarding the standards of behavior seen as acceptable and the means of acquiring power seen as legitimate – employees are becoming “citizens” in their companies
- Increased use of technology in social and domestic life, so that archaic equipment in the company is unacceptable
- Development of distance working

It seems to us that learning practices have obvious links to these changes. They take account of the individual as a whole, creating conditions that favor individual and group initiatives and in particular those leading to greater sharing and influence. Employees are no longer circumscribed by their job descriptions and titles; they have become whole people.

“Collective” now has the positive connotation of a shared intelligence that can develop better solutions than can be achieved by any one person, no matter what his or her qualities.

2. Expression of the Personality

The dichotomy between public, professional life and personal, private life is no longer clear cut. People can now show their personality, sensitivities, character, and moods without losing authority.

The rise in popularity of *Psychologies* magazine is a good illustration. Launched in France in 1970, it had relatively limited distribution until the middle of the 1990s. Jean-Louis Servan-Schreiber bought it in 1997, sure that self-knowledge would rapidly become a subject of major interest. Until then, only women’s magazines gave space to personal-ity tests and other examinations of personal life.

The forecast was confirmed: *Psychologies* had a print run of 320,000 in 2005, which puts it on the same level as other general interest publications. Other magazines also jumped on the bandwagon, in particular those aimed at managers and their professional problems. Today, they all have columns that address the person behind the professional, the feeling dimension, offering advice on how to handle the different situations that people in the workplace encounter.

Over the same period, the cell phone crashed through the professional/private barrier. When you call people on their cell phones, you never know where they are when they answer. Whether someone is at home with the kids, on holiday by the sea, on a train platform, or in an airport lounge, the background noises have become part of the professional dialogue. This situation is often underscored by a comment that personalizes the conversation. To measure the change that has happened, remember that before the age of the cell phone, companies barely tolerated personal calls. Another point: Today, public space is occupied by private conversations. We have become accustomed to hearing “big kiss” and “ciao” at the end of personal conversations. Private space has invaded public space, and the reverse, weaving together a rich and complex social fabric.

Managers are now nomadic: You never know where they are when you reach them, since their remote work tools travel with him. Work is now everywhere and at any time. French legislation for a 35-hour work week and compensatory days off has accentuated the blending of work and life, a phenomenon underscored by the fact that there are fewer and fewer assistants to take or filter calls.

Finally, companies have made personal development courses an article of faith. Catalogues of training courses provided for employees include many such programs. Similarly, personal coaching has become an accepted practice. In France during the 1980s, only American IT companies recognized training and coaching as useful for the develop-

ment of managers and teams. Until halfway through the 1990s, people signed up for personal development seminars as private individuals. They brought their professional problems with them, but the company didn't recognize the value of these services.

3. Reevaluation of the Concept of "Collective"

In 1989 – that is to say, more than 20 years ago – Philippe d'Iribarne published his work "La logique de l'honneur," comparing the cultural traditions of three countries: France, the U.S., and the Netherlands. In it, he shows that France has kept a strong link to the Ancien Régime, or "Old Regime": a sense of duty and privilege impregnates our social relations at work and our collective activities. He continued his analysis with a description of the abuses of this tradition:

- Authoritarianism leading to misuse of power by the prince or president
- Laxity leading to loss of feelings of responsibility and respect for one's duty
- A mania for being objective, expressed through an exaggerated attachment to procedure
- Sectarianism giving rise to clans or fiefdoms

Thus French tradition has been strongly marked by the fact that the head of anything was expected to decide for himself how his underlings were to be organized; he would determine how "his" group or department would be run. He might consult personnel and consider the opinions of other employees, but the prerogative of the final decision was his. A collegial management style would appear to show weakness and the inability to assume power.

This was d'Iribarne's analysis of the many setbacks encountered by French companies trying to make use of American management models. The cultural divide between absolute individual power and more collective, negotiated practices was difficult to overcome, but today we are no longer in the same position. Globalization has swept over us, and the "win-win" concept, also an American intro-

duction, has made great advances. "Collective" now has the positive connotation of a shared intelligence that can develop better solutions than can be achieved by any one person, no matter what his or her qualities. Nevertheless, we see that in certain companies with a dominant French culture, learning attitudes emphasizing teamwork, discussion, and co-creation even today run up against the French tradition of power and prestige.

The crowd, the mass, has become the group, the collective embodiment of unity in diversity.

Elsewhere, we see that French society has evolved toward an appreciation of group actions, stimulated by sport and music. The victory of the French team at Wimbledon in 1996 made a deep impression. We celebrated not just a victory, but also the team. The coach, Yannick Noah, expressed the strength of togetherness as the basis for victory. Two years later, all of France was seized with enthusiasm as it saw its soccer team win the World Cup. For several weeks, analysts enthused about the strength generated by the group, its diversity, and its modest captain, Aimé Jacquet, whose advice was subsequently valued in matters of team management and leadership. Team sports have become models for companies, while live rebroadcasts have amplified such events to an extraordinary extent, so that everyone who watches shares the same emotions at the same moment, becoming members of a strongly united group who share an experience.

Music creates a similar phenomenon. In concerts that regularly bring together tens of thousands of people in person and several million more through TV coverage, the group is brought to its peak. The time has long passed when one could say with a touch of condescension, "I hate crowds." The crowd, the mass, has become the group, the collective embodiment of unity in diversity.

4. Internet As Creator of Interactions

We shall not go into a subject here that fills the pages of the daily papers. We shall simply indicate new usages linked to the internet that resonate with the dimensions of collectivity and learning:

- New ways of getting to know people or reconnecting with them (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn)
- New ways of learning: Wikipedia, FAQs, eBay, e-learning, e-communities
- New ways of perceiving oneself as a member of a network: freed of material constraints, one is part of a great whole on a planetary scale, which offers exciting possibilities
- New ways to express affect and emotion on social networks, such as emoticons in e-mails
- Peer-to-peer exchanges
- Radio and TV programs that have contact sites where any listener or viewer can comment, enrich, criticize, and co-construct the program, which puts them on an equal level with script-writers and experts
- Blogs as personal exhibition spaces and invitations to dialogue
- Use of the web as a source of information from people directly involved with an event – a practice becoming more widespread as distrust of centralized news sources increases

Change agents commit themselves for the long term, opening the road to sustainable development not only for the planet, but also for the men and women of today.

5. Aspiration for More Democracy

In September 2009, the following definition of participatory democracy appeared on Wikipedia: "Participatory democracy is a form of sharing and exercise of power based on the strengthening of citizen participation in making political decisions." While almost all the works quoted by Wikipedia on this subject were written after 2000, aspirations to power sharing have been around for much longer. For example, published in 1993, "*Vers l'entreprise démocratique, le récit d'une expérience pionnière*" ("Toward the democratic enterprise, the story of a pioneer") recounts a participatory approach that started in reflection groups in 1986 in the Société des Transports Poitevins (the Transportation Company in Poitou-France). The authors, psychologists, emphasize that they were different from previous groups introduced under the Auroux labor laws of 1982 and 1986. They considered this approach to be a third way and not a tool of senior management or of the unions. We give this example because it reflects the questions raised by learning practices when they follow the pattern of participatory democracy, in particular when they refer to reflection and consultation. We can identify how such practices:

- disturb senior managers and the management hierarchy (unless they themselves initiated this approach);
- disturb the unions, which are often locked into a logic of "whatever it is, we're against it";
- can serve as an excuse or be hijacked, just as the tools of participatory democracy are when pressed into the service of marketing or political communications;
- can take root throughout the entire organization.

6. Sustainable Development

A few landmarks from the past decade:

- **2009:** Yann Arthus-Bertrand organized a planet-wide event around the launch of his film *Home*.
- **April 2007:** Nicolas Hulot gets the principal candidates for the French presidential elections to sign an “ecology pact,” highlighting the environment as a major theme for society as a whole.
- **2004:** A *QueSais-je* (serial pocket encyclopedia) was published on sustainable development.
- **2002:** Roselyne Bachelot was the first French minister appointed to handle sustainable development.

Change agents, as we show in the corresponding article in this volume, are part of the current of thought concerned with sustainable development:

- They introduce creative and innovative approaches.
- They commit themselves for the long term, opening the road to sustainable development not only for the planet, but also for the men and women of today. ■

END NOTE

1. J. Curie and R. Dupuy, « Acteurs en organisations ou l’interconstruction des milieux de vie. » In: C. Louche, Editor, *Individus et Organisations*, No English translation.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Catherine Redelsperger works in companies and associations to develop collaboration for handling complexity. Her participation in action research is fueled by her curiosity and the questions: “What are we talking about when we say ‘learning’?” and “What are the realities of companies faced with complexity and how can we look at the paths they follow?”

Béatrice Quasnik’s association with this action research project is an extension of her commitment to the transformations sweeping through our companies. A change support consultant and coach, she has been working with companies for the past 15 years to encourage the empowerment of people and groups working toward transformation.

FEATURE 11.1-2

Toward a New Type of Systemic Leadership: An Awakening Awareness

IRÈNE DUPOUX-COUTURIER



Irène Dupoux-Couturier

Research on “Ten Years of Learning in Companies” provided strong evidence that a new type of leadership is emerging, able to adapt to the growing complexity of our systems and face the current economic crisis by relying on people, the essential resources of any organization. The term “leadership” has always been ambiguous. Very different, even opposite meanings can be attributed to it, which heavy simplification allows us to link to cultural differences – Anglo-Saxon, Latin, Asian, etc. This ambiguity has become more pronounced in recent decades, and the word covers many different management and personal styles. By tracing the dialectical axis between “hierarchical authority” and “autonomous staff,” the term “leadership” can be seen to encompass authoritarian leadership, persuasive leadership, participatory

and empathetic leadership, delegating leadership, all the way to empowerment. Over time, these definitions are merging, shading into each other. The traditional authoritarian leadership of the 1950s no longer appears effective (a sociological trend paralleled by the decline in paternal authority within the family), and the same change is occurring, somewhat later, in companies. The charismatic leaders of 1970-1980 are also changing. They were the leader-prophets with a vision of their companies, often developing the vision alone, like an inventor, before getting others to accept it. Some of them were more like leader-poets, realizing their vision either in the light of intuition, or through sheer courage and belief in their transcendent destiny.

Today we see something completely different – a slow movement toward a collective construction of a company’s vision. Certain examples noted in our study are quite striking. Leaders think that they ought to have a vision of the company; that’s why they were appointed, but they have their own doubts. The environment is changing so much that they know the vision will have to be in a permanent state of change: Can I really have long-term vision? They conceive, propose, train, and lead their team and discover with astonishment that their vision is not easy to share. The base reacts, makes counter-proposals, and the vision is debated. “We are moving from the decisive, heroic act to a shared, social process,” says Arie de Geus, a co-founder of SoL. Alain de Vulpian adds: “The company today should no longer see itself as planning its development in a mechanically logical environment, but as tinkering within a transformational ecosystem that follows an organic logic.” It is this profound change that the study throws into relief. To be effective, modern leaders must transform themselves as well:

- They must not only be capable of motivating and sweeping others along, but also be attentive and listen to their teams. They may be charismatic but above all they must be empathetic and therapeutic.
 - They are sensitive to environments, paying attention to society and its changes.
 - They are socioperceptive, open to new and disturbing or even revolutionary ideas.
- They anticipate.

- They understand and accept that in an increasingly complex world, companies must deliberately design experimental strategies; they recognize the role of the base in the development of strategic thought.
- They put people at the heart of the organization, and accept or recognize the central, contagious role of change agents. They rely on these individuals to assist in the emergence of innovation, creation, and the ability to anticipate.

After the “open” period of the 1970s, when numerous charismatic leaders were the guiding lights of companies and administrations (to name a few, Per Gyllenhammar, Volvo; Antoine Riboud, Danone; François Dalle, l’Oréal; Paul Delouvrier, Electricity of France, EDF), the 1990s were the years of ever-increasing individualism, materialism, short-term financial engineering, rapid return on investment, reengineering, management by objectives, a focus on the quantitative (“greed is good”), and everywhere, managerial pressure and stress.

Today, many traditional structures are trying to save themselves; resistance to change is still widespread; pressure is heavy; and distress among company employees is a daily reality. But the new leaders who are appearing are very much aware of these dynamics. So, have we reached a tipping point? The personal evolution of the people we met, the wider role of internal consultants, and the formally or informally created free spaces within companies allow one to think so. The emerging leaders are not dreamy idealists but listeners who attend to the needs of people and their organizations. They are “pragmatic humanists.” Such leaders are sometimes at the head of their companies; sometimes they are in key positions; and sometimes they are simply change agents carrying their networks along with them.

Starting from these observations, how can we describe the leader of the 21st century? English speakers employ the term “sustainable leadership” to mean a leadership capable of causing sustainable and efficient changes. Others employ the terms “global leadership” or “integral leadership.” This is a big step forward, an awareness of a leadership that:

- is systemic and global, aware of interactions and responsible to and for the whole system;
 - is comprised of individuals aware of the social realities in which they live and conscious of the ceaseless activity of living social structures;
 - is oriented toward creativity;
 - wishes to change, is able to shift the internal and interpersonal perspectives within which it operates, and has empathy;
 - is aware on a global scale of current practices preventing sustainable and effective change;
 - develops individual responsibility and enables changes in the attitudes and behavior of themselves and others;
 - works as part of a team to change cultures, habits, standards, structures, and the system.
- This 21st-century leadership will develop through interaction with the societal changes now taking place, in new formal and informal networks, both professional and social.

The idea of competition could give way to that of cooperation. All over the world, small and medium-sized businesses and organizations within civil society are beginning to show the way. As influential centers of business and social creativity, they are led by entrepreneurs whose business is a social activity. Are socioperceptive leaders going to usher in a new paradigm? ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After a career as director of the Centre de formation aux réalités internationales (CEFRI), an executive training center on international realities, **Irène Dupoux-Couturier** is now vice president and managing director of SoL France. By participating in this action research project, she hoped to understand to what extent phenomena that she had observed over the past 30 years in companies facing a changing world were now becoming the focus of their approach: a new type of management centered on people.

FEATURE 11.1-2

Empathy, Socioperception, and Anticipation

ALAIN DE VULPIAN



Alain de Vulpian

This article is based on two sets of field research. SoL France recently conducted in-depth interviews with some 50 change agents operating in a dozen European companies with the goal of clarifying how empathy and socioperception affect businesses. The study showed that these men and women have highly developed socioperception skills that play an integral role in their professional lives, that is, they each possess a deep systemic intuition of the condition and functioning of the social systems within which they operate. Without going into an analysis of the complexity of their particular situations, they sense the most significant potential future directions and intuit opportunities for positive intervention. They pick up and interpret the weak signals that foretell of changes to come, perceive dangerous or beneficial latencies, sense various possible future scenarios, and act in a correspondingly informed manner. For these reasons, they are efficient and effective agents of change.

Since the 1950s, Cofremca¹ and its European and American partners within the RISC (Research Institute on Social Change) and then in Sociovision have observed and analyzed the resurgence of empathy and socioperception in western society. Cofremca originally used the term “intra-ception,” a concept approximately equivalent to “socioperception.”

The Emergence of Socioperception

The way we used to be

The great German sociologist Norbert Elias analyzed the social evolution that brought the countries of Europe from a feudal society to the society of the early 20th century.² Over several centuries, changes in the interlinked chains of relationships and behaviors among different social sectors, including knights and nobles, merchants, bourgeoisie, and peasants, reflected the “process of civilization.”

Medieval man, represented by the knight, was driven by his impulses and emotions. He was combative and aware of his body, his freedom restrained only by the violence of those stronger than he. Society was violent, and any centralizing power was uncertain.

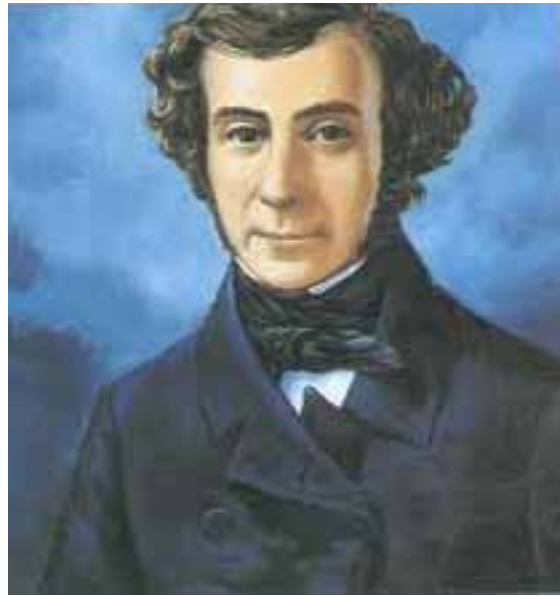
According to Elias, the process of civilization began at the end of the Middle Ages, took shape during the 16th and 17th centuries, and blossomed in the 19th century. The increasing power of certain lords who dominated their peers to become kings, and the taming and domestication of nobles drawn to the court, initiated the process that subsequently enabled the State to become the sole legitimate purveyor of violence. Self-control – of violence, of sexual impulses, of the emotions – became a social necessity,

first for the nobles, then for the rising middle classes, and finally for the population as a whole. People had to restrain their behavior, deliberately shaping their emotions by observing themselves and their entourages.

Elias emphasized the growth of guilt: embarrassment, disgust, and feelings of shame attached to the evocation of bodily functions, the body itself, the interaction of bodies, and anything that could be likened to animal behavior. Cool regard, intellect, and distance became acceptable and prized. Fine language, witty remarks, and courtesy distanced people from the immediacy of raw emotions. The intellect stood back from raw, pulsing life. The *other* became an object to be weighed, evaluated, judged from the outside, and categorized rather than experienced as a person. The spread of literacy among the populations of 19th-century Europe reflected the final stage in this evolution.

The resurgence of sensations, emotions, and impulses

The end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th saw a bifurcation in this process of civilization. Painting (impressionist, surrealist, abstract, etc.) prefigured a return to the warmth and disorderliness of impulses, sensations, and emotions, and a decline in admiration for intellect and clear ideas. Freud incarnated and reinforced this movement. From the beginning of the 1950s, socio-anthropological field research began to describe the ways in which ordinary people experienced this U-turn.³ In-depth interviews with Swedish and French subjects showed that younger and more modern respondents were more intimate with their sensations, emotions, and impulses than their older peers. Sensations of all sorts – visual, tactile, olfactory, and kinesthetic – moved into the foreground of consciousness. It became permissible to feel them, explore them, and savor them. It was acceptable to express these forms of perception and translate them into behavior. People opened themselves to their sexuality, which became less a matter of moral principles and intellectual representations and more an affair of mutually enriching sensations and emotions.



Alexis de Tocqueville, from empathy to anticipation

Cofremca baptized this sociocultural current, which was to become deeper and more extensive throughout the following decades, “polysensualism.”

Mental self-awareness

Restraint and self-censorship continued to loosen their hold. More and more people expressed their emotions and impulses through their words and actions, and in doing so discovered and became more conscious of them. They developed an intimate connection with their interior life. They become increasingly self-aware, not only physically but also mentally.

During the 1980s, growing numbers of people stood back from and evaluated their lives. This process eventually led them to reorient their strategies, modify their objectives, and manipulate their emotions and impulses. This skill fed into a major underlying trend, already several centuries old, in the evolution of western culture – the pursuit of happiness and emancipation. People progressed in this direction as they learned to identify the constraints that held them down, the actions that freed them, and the sources of happiness or suffering that they experienced. They soon became aware, in ever larger numbers, that the great Happiness, the Grand Passion, the Glorious Evening of the Revolution, and any other mythical object

of their dreams are illusory targets, and that it is the accumulation of small happinesses, well-being, and affection that brings real contentment.

Resurgence of empathy

Field observations show that a resurgence of empathy accompanied the recovery of buried sensations, emotions, and impulses. We started to live not only in deeper contact with our own selves, but also with others. We began to perceive others as living entities with sensations, emotions, impulses, and intentions. Beginning in the 1960s, more and more people enjoyed “putting themselves in the other’s place” and felt they could perceive or become aware of other’s sensations, emotions, and mental processes. Through trial and error and a learning process, many improved their empathetic skills.

Empathy is a natural ability of humans and some animal species. Recent findings in the neurosciences have given us a glimpse of the mechanisms in the nervous system through which empathy is constructed.⁴ As Norbert Elias showed, the process of civilization and the standardization and intellectualization of education that dominated during an earlier period of history had put this ability to sleep. The emerging current of social evolution beginning during the 20th century has reawakened it.

A broadened and deepened form of reason

We have mentioned perceiving and feeling, but reasoning is not necessarily absent from the processes we have described. Its presence became increasingly evident from the early 1970s and especially in the 1980s. The culture of Rational Thought, a child of the Renaissance, the Age of Reform, and the Enlightenment, was strengthened by the spread of literacy and secondary education. In the 1970s, this field expanded. It no longer centered exclusively on words, clearly defined ideas, concepts, and arguments, but began to deal with the analysis and understanding of the emotions and interior life (one’s own, other people’s, and that of society as a whole). The result was increased

integration of reason with the emotions and a greater ability for people to stand back and critically analyze their own conduct and that of others. This permanent form of apprenticeship for life and living continues today.

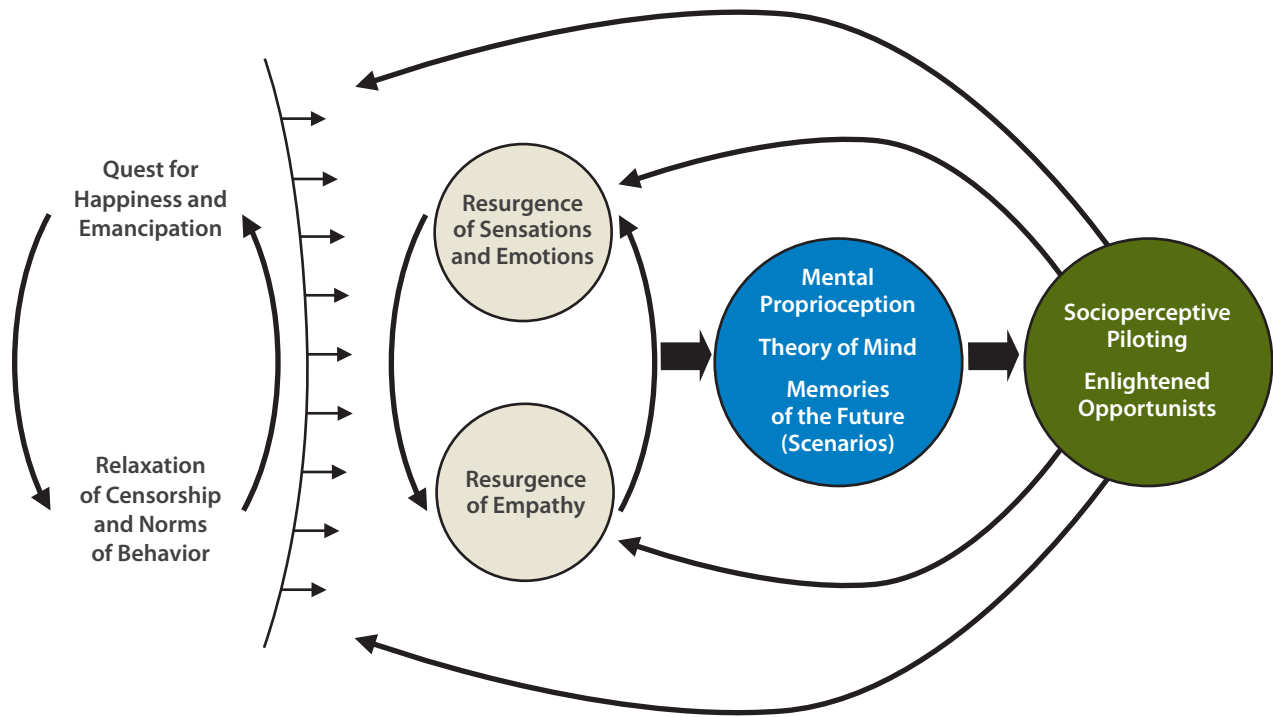
People Who Have a Strategic Approach to Daily Life: From Empathy to Socioperception

In our research, we have seen an increasing number of people who live like strategic opportunists and succeed quite well in steering a wise course through life. Here is a rough profile: In a complex and uncertain environment, these individuals orient themselves through the joint use of reason and emotion, tempering one with the other.⁵ They cultivate their capacity for empathy, thereby enriching their emotions and feeling more acutely the happiness and suffering of others. But they control their compassion at a reasonable level, not losing sight of their central egoistic ambition to live a life that they find acceptable. The cultivation of empathy enables them to perceive or imagine the picture of themselves that forms in the minds of others with whom they interact. On the basis of these theories, they anticipate the behaviors and reactions of others.

People develop an understanding of social systems, progressively perceive the motivations of others (individuals and groups), anticipate behaviors, and sense latencies and dynamic currents underlying the everyday course of events. These people are thus able to scan the strategic areas of life that interest or suit them and are ready at any moment to make the most of the opportunities or parry the threats that crop up (see figure, p. 53).

They also develop their perceptions of potential futures. Beginning in the 1980s, we see more and more young people who say that they have no clear or fixed objectives for their lives, but that they continually and happily imagine potential futures and the ways they could take advantage of them to improve their own prospects. This capacity for treating the future as a mixture of

Simplified Diagram of the Process That Generates Socioperception



When people are motivated by a quest for happiness and emancipation, and when censorship and social norms are relaxed, a mutually enriching resurgence of sensations, emotions, and intelligent empathy occurs. This combination supports a mental form of proprioception, feeds into theories of the mind, and enriches the range of memories and available scenarios of the future. People immediately improve their socioperceptive piloting skills, becoming alert to opportunities in their own lives. As they continue their learning, they become increasingly aware of their sensations, emotions, and empathies. The result is a rise in the level of emancipation and happiness in society as a whole and the continued deconstruction of earlier forms of censorship and social norms.

scenarios and trends along with developing hypothetical action plans has without doubt been fundamental for the survival of our species.

Thanks to their ability to unite emotions and reason, deepening their empathy and their understanding of social systems, these strategic opportunists improve their view of possible futures. They increase their socioperceptive abilities, that is to say, are more apt than previous generations to perceive the interlinking chains of relationships and capture the weak signals that foretell blockages, fluctuations, or bifurcations, and to conceive of the potential impact of this or that action on

their own lives, happiness, and scenarios of the future. They thus become equipped to pilot their lives in a well-informed manner, in a society where individual behaviors and relationships are becoming less programmed and freed of control by conventions or authorities than ever before.

Socioperception Plays a Central Role in the New "Society of People"

Progress in socioperception and the development of self-organizing societies feed into each other

Simultaneous to the rise of this group of strategic opportunists, a self-structuring society began to

emerge that is profoundly different from the one that dominated the first two-thirds of the 20th century. Since the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, as people have become more integrated and whole as individuals, they have tended to desert hierarchies and the massive compartmentalized and convention-bound society in which they once lived. Some, like the youth protestors of 1968, do so in a spectacular manner, but the majority tip-toe away, seeking to find and express their personalities. As they do, they drain energy from the organizations, institutions, conventions, and hierarchies of which they were once part.

Nevertheless, they do not leave in order to isolate themselves. They leave in search of others of their kind or with whom they feel in tune. Through connections and break-ups, networks and small groups form and reform, within which people interact and create systems of their own. Small units eventually interact with each other, becoming interdependent and creating units of a higher order. And so it continues, as the new society organizes itself into a fractal architecture with complex interlocking layers. Since the middle of the 1970s, a new social fabric with a complexity analogous to that of a living organism has been coming into being. Since the middle of the 1980s, the proliferation of sophisticated interpersonal communications equipment (web-linked portables, internet, cell phones, etc.) has accelerated this transformation.

The enrichment of socioperceptive skills is doubly linked to the development of this new social fabric. People who use these skills act as facilitators, managing the adjustments that large-scale change brings and becoming fertile sources of small happinesses by helping individuals see each other. Concurrently, finding one's way in this complex, living society is in itself an apprenticeship in socioperception. Those who are more perceptive than others benefit by becoming more influential within society.

The new family is a melting pot of increasing socioperception

In this new society, the family unit is no longer the same as in previous times; nevertheless, it remains central. A century ago, the dominant model was still that of the institutionalized, authoritarian family, based on a marriage of convenience and commanded by the father, who was the guardian and transmitter of social standards. From the 1930s on, we saw the gradual triumph of marriage for love and the decrease in rigidity of institutional norms. Today, the model that has become increasingly important over the past few decades is that of the adaptable, interactive family – “biodegradable,” “erotico-affective,” flexible rather than rigidly structured, and able to withstand change.

Such a family is open to the external world; its members are profoundly attached to each other, but can maintain their own personal networks. It is no longer necessarily a formalized entity: In Scandinavia, France, and England, more than half of all births occur outside of marriage. The family is ideally a space for love and life, and will survive only as long as it is able to sustain affection. The development of contraception removed a source of anguish for women and helped couples cultivate their emotions and feelings of erotic love, deepening the dialogue between them. Thanks to birth control, parents often ardently wish for the children who are born. The exchange of affection between parents and with their children has become a key element of family life. Polls show that from year to year, an increasing number of parents try to bring up their children with caresses rather than lectures. We now know that little humans, as well as little monkeys, need to be raised in that kind of affectionate atmosphere if they are to develop their interpersonal skills.

At the end of the 1940s, David Riesman and his team⁶ outlined the emergence of what I call *socioperception*. His book made quite a lot of noise. According to Riesman et al, in the 19th century, American society consisted for the most part of “inner-directed” people. Children were brought up in a small, authoritarian family, closed to the outer

world and dominated by the father. This demanding father-image gave people a *compass*, a conviction that there is a direction to be followed through life. In contrast, in the large American towns of the mid-20th century, young middle-class children have grown up in families that are relatively open to the outside world and in which mothers are also important. The children tack between parents and in this way learn diplomacy. They also grow up in groups of other children, their peer groups, where they learn how to “fit in.” They thus acquire an “other-directed” personality, equipped with a *social radar* rather than a compass.

In western and northern Europe, more than three out of four families no longer function on a hierarchical basis. They have become heterarchical social systems, connected to exterior networks, with leadership and influence circulating, passing from father to mother or to this or that child according to talents and circumstances. Within these families, new systems of governance are emerging, based on interaction and the capacity of participants to adjust to one another. Fathers whose socioperceptive understanding is weak and who want to affirm their authority usually fail, triggering dramas and quarrels. Other parents succeed in a sort of empathetic governance, in which family members function in a relatively harmonious manner. A complex systemic relationship likely exists between the spread and progress of empathy, the sensorial/emotional link within couples, parent/child affection, a self-adjusting social fabric, and empathetic governance.⁷

A divided society works on itself and starts to be self-regulating ...but not sufficiently

At the beginning of the 21st century, we can say that two societies coexist and interact: the old “society of hierarchy,” fragmented but massive, in which power centers seek to conserve their top-down control, and the new, heterarchic “society of people.” The society of people is subtly insinuating itself into the earlier form of society and establishing itself in the nooks and crannies of organization charts, while small power centers in businesses and other kinds of organizations, political parties,



**Nelson Mandela,
an accomplished
socioperceptive**

and religious institutions all seek to defend positions of authority acquired in times past.

The internal cultures of public authorities, large businesses, and other enterprises are still influenced by the monolithic and hierarchical character of the mechanistic society from which they descended. Old patterns of thought and mindsets, supported by these cultures, cut off a good many of their managers from all forms of systemic thought or perception. They are not encouraged to be socioperceptive or they become disconnected from their capacity for socioperception; they don't feel the latencies within human groups that could be activated, the dynamic currents that want to be brought to light, or the deficiencies that could be remedied. This cultural blindness leads to perverse effects, deficiencies, turbulence, blockages, paralysis, and failure to innovate.

As their level of socioperception rises, ordinary people learn to protect themselves from the manipulations of centralized powers. Socially adept, they know quite well how to go about cultivating their personal happiness and the sense of meaning they need. Even when they think society is not going well, they are often satisfied by their success in managing their own circumstances. They are not trying to make the whole of society happier, but their personal search for small pleasures and meaning, taken together, have this final effect.

Some go further and, feeling the suffering around them, take action to attenuate it, correct current social pathologies, and contribute to the self-realization of others. *Throughout the West, the multiplication of individual initiatives, networks, associations, and NGOs has given rise to a sort of informal infrastructure that works to remedy the misfortunes, dysfunctional processes, and sources of violence within our societies.* This social immune system, which acts as both a prevention and a cure, plays an essential role in the relatively peaceful equilibrium of western society at its current stage of development. It seems to support the construction of a mutually supportive society.

However, this self-regulation by the society of ordinary people is not always sufficient. Some pathologies remain untreated. The self-organized approach lacks the advanced empathetic and therapeutic interventions that could provide a higher level of adjustment, a sort of governance that sees ahead and provides early warning and management of harmful processes. Fortunately, public authorities, organizations, and businesses at all levels (local, national, and global) are learning to be empathetic, socioperceptive, and therapeutic. They will work with and through the social immune system of the new society of people and learn how to develop suitable forms of intervention.

Key role of socioperceptive innovators

Increasing numbers of leaders and innovators sense the direction of current changes; they seek to produce innovations that are in tune with these shifts, winning favorable reception and in turn reinforcing the movement toward change. Women, new generations of men, and socioperceptive leaders are winning influential positions. They are aware that our current era is favorable to sociological innovations that improve people's lives and facilitate the functioning and self-governance of society; they have a keen intuition for latencies and societal dynamics, and can pick out weak signals and shaping trends; they have a naturally systemic perception of reality, seeing chains of actions and interactions and anticipating three

steps ahead. As a result, these new leaders are open to ideas for innovation that have a good chance of reinforcing latent demand. Such innovations feed into new social formats; for example, blogs, forums, and social networks; search engines, internet portals, web sites, Google, Yahoo, Wikipedia; pragmatic, humanist change agents in companies; systems providing free-access bicycles, car sharing, and new ways of working, etc. This "sociogenic" proliferation places great weight on the society of people, to the detriment of the society of localized powers.

Waves of collective emotional intelligence weigh on existing power structures

Simultaneously, this increasing self-determination among ordinary people is perturbing the processes that guide and shape public opinion. Men and women, young and old, rich and poor are constructing greater areas of autonomy: They react to events on their own account and in their own way. Growing numbers are freeing themselves from ancient affiliations and outworn ideologies to decide things for themselves. Faced with an event or situation, their reactions are guided less by categories, organizations, preconceived notions, or preestablished camps than in the past, and spring from their own impressions and personal awareness.

This individual transformation feeds the emergence of waves of collective emotional intelligence. *The people are not isolated cases, and they cluster together.* Their empathy makes them aware of the reactions and sensitivities of others who perceive key trends at the same time as they do. They feel on the same wavelength with certain people and draw closer to them, at least for the moment. This interaction of personal perceptions may lead to the development of short-lived or long-lasting communities, of waves of collective sensitivity that escape the control of preestablished categories. These categories may become deconstructed as a result.

Such popular feeling can ultimately influence the conduct of leaders and the course of events. Thus, the American-led war in Iraq gave rise to one such

wave. The populations of a number of European countries felt that this war risked destabilizing fragile systems and moving the global course of events in a disastrous direction. In most cases, these opinions ran counter to government decisions and were independent of the positions taken by the political forces in power. Once started, the protests grew. Similar waves have formed around climate change and against commercial practices seen as inhumane and predatory. On a smaller scale, waves of collective emotional intelligence may form in a town or company.

Contrasting Attitudes of Companies to Socioperception

Companies have adopted diverse and variable postures with regard to socioperception. From the early 1970s, a number of pioneering major companies turned out to be extremely socioperceptive. The new socio-economy that developed around the turn of the century, between 1990–2000, is the fruit of free-floating socioperception. However, during the same period, old-fashioned companies focused on short-term financial profitability and now have little or no socioperceptive and anticipatory capacities.

Large pioneering groups or companies have blazed the trail toward socioperception

From the early 1970s, senior managers at a number of pioneering companies felt that a radical change was under way in their business environment and sought to discover ways to cope with a different future. Certain cases seemed to me particularly striking.

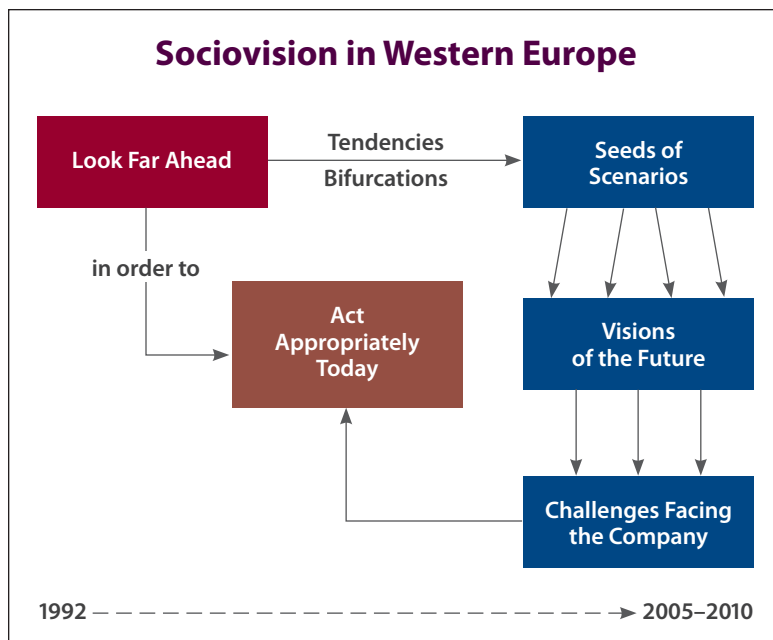
Per Gyllenhammar (chairman of Volvo) noticed that Swedish workers were becoming independent and autonomous persons who would no longer accept the mechanistic Taylorist approach to work. However, he did not want to bring in foreign labor and saw that this new capacity for autonomy on the part of Swedish workers could be turned to an advantage by combining self-organization with supervisory management. Volvo created autonomous, independent workshops in which a team was left totally free to organize itself

and manage its own work to achieve its production objectives.

André Besnard (chairman of Royal Dutch Shell) and Pierre Wack developed strategic planning through scenarios. Pierre Wack's scenarios, inspired by biology rather than mechanical engineering, were profound and original. They were not the result of a rational analysis of possible futures, but arose through understanding the different chains of linked events that could result from the dynamics currently at work. A worldwide network of several dozen socioperceptives, together with two teams of anthropologists and futurologists, helped to identify these dynamics. Shell's global scenarios enabled the company to anticipate and react more effectively to the oil crisis than its competitors. These scenarios also helped the company perceive as early as the mid-1970s that it would have to learn to behave like a living organism in a new, organic social fabric about to emerge. Other more limited scenarios focused on the possible developments of the French political scene in the event of the socialist and communist left coming to power and provided the foundation for Shell's decision not to sell its network of service stations in France at that time.

At the beginning of the 1970s, L'Oréal was an intensely organic company, that is to say, it was a major actor made up of small, living entities within which relationships developed more on a spontaneous basis than through intellectual organization. François Dalle, the chairman, understood and drew his colleagues' attention to the spontaneous development of "parallel hierarchies" (today we would say "networks") within the group, and the opportunities they offered for influencing future developments. He also perceived how to turn his teams into gigantic listening posts, offering willing ears to women's concerns and orienting product innovation toward the systematic search for the seeds of the future (see figure, p. 58).

During the same period, Bernard Hanon (then director of automobiles at Renault) successfully refocused new model design on an understanding



of growing dissatisfaction among car users. Gone was the emphasis on social standing and impressive bodywork; the stress was now on cars that were enjoyable to be in and drive.

During the 1980s, a good number of other important companies followed in these initial steps, but the movement was rapidly thwarted.

A new socio-economy of meaning and self-directed adjustment emerged

Beginning in the 1980s under the impulse of a number of socioperceptives, a socio-economy based on meaning and self-organized adjustments began to emerge, in synergy with the development of the society of ordinary people. This new socio-economy sought to lead the structures of the old economy toward the future. Made up of small, often networked units, like living organisms, it produced efficiency and vitality from the hopes and aspirations of entrepreneurs, collaborators, customers, and society itself. These included start-ups working in the fields of information technology, biotechnology, and nanotechnology, as well as new services in partnership with associations, NGOs, consultants, individual entrepreneurs and their networks, think tanks, and nonprofits. Such organizations have proliferated widely over the past 30 years.

During the early 2000s, a new type of hybrid organization emerged that tries to combine “nonprofit” with “for profit.” These entities are often known as “social businesses.” They work on a socially oriented rather than profit-seeking basis, but differ from most charity groups in that they generate sustainable revenues and are not reliant on philanthropy. They retain and reinvest revenues rather than distributing them to shareholders.

The emerging socio-economy is profoundly marked by the new society of people, its sensitivities, and its values. It responds to this group’s expectations, offsets its insufficiencies, takes care of its problems, supports its development, and enriches its interactions. Field research carried out in France and the United States during 2000 shows that these new, organic forms share the following characteristics:

- All participants are involved in their development.
- Added meaning is more important than added value.
- Strategies arise from the collective intelligence of the entire social group.
- Organization is transversal and heterarchical, that is to say, the leadership circulates.

These organizations start out as little groups of people who perceive possible channels of emergence and are intensely motivated by the mission of promoting a new service or idea. They often struggle to work their way into standard institutional forms. Some find themselves ill treated or even strangled by investment markets, but they are warmly welcomed by the society of ordinary people.

Old-fashioned businesses became blinded by the champions of hyper-financial capitalism

Between 1990 and 2000, large, traditional companies were subject to a double pressure. The emphasis on short-term financial profit forced them to tighten every available screw and close their eyes to society’s shifts. Simultaneously, new social attitudes and modern mentalities worked their way into the companies, multiplying the number of change agents within them and making their

top-down management style increasingly problematic.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, a hyper-financial form of capitalism centered entirely on the short term made its appearance in the United States and spread rapidly. An imperfect laissez-faire policy that did not take account of moral hazard gave extraordinary freedom to players in the financial world, who began to take extreme risks in order to generate extreme profits. The result was a particular form of capitalism centered on financial speculation and the maximization of short-term profits – a virtual casino. Financial actors inveigled many companies into their casino. They introduced a new type of shareholder into many boards of directors, voracious money men little interested in the vitality and sustainable development of the business. Many companies gave overwhelming power to the shareholders and generously rewarded the senior managers who served them. Finance, once the lifeblood of growing industries, thus became a parasite on the economy and a source of sickness for many companies.

In this context of financial and stock-market excess, senior managers of a good many large, old-style companies focused on short-term financial profitability rather than on the evolutionary development of their business activity, markets, social context, or even the health of the company. Managers' attention and discussions with employees focused on business plans and quarterly results rather than threats and opportunities on a three-year horizon. Those who were concerned about the future of the business, the markets, work processes, trends, or the planet were replaced by financial minds. No one encouraged the emergence of new forms of management that could adapt to the changing character of the men and women working for the company. For instance, the car industry produced "fashion-conscious" cars rather than automobiles that would contribute to making life easier for people. Managers talked about ecology, making politically correct noises to get good press and keep the company image bright, instead of seriously trying to find

development strategies that would provide answers to ecological threats while still assuring sustainable futures for their companies.

Many firms chased profits unmercifully, reducing costs, tightening screws, and cutting quality by automating, in a desperate search for efficiency. As highly paid consultants reengineered their organizations, a Taylorist management culture of hierarchies, centralization, technocratic domination, internal competition, and bureaucracy reemerged.

Parallel to these developments, modern society was extending its influence into businesses of all sorts, its networks quietly reaching into the gaps and interstices of management and organizational charts. Employees, especially the younger ones, became more autonomous and anxious to create their own version of a decent and enjoyable life, while customer and citizen dissatisfaction grew and the health of the planet continued to deteriorate. Within companies, unhappiness at work increased, provoking protests and disputes. Active socioperceptives who became aware of the negative effects of the dominant organizational model reacted. Some became pragmatic agents for humanistic change, while others took the path of blockage and protest. Both groups tended to organize into networks and exerted pressure on their companies.

Businesses that suppressed socioperception did so at great expense. Many companies:

- failed to perceive or pursue development opportunities that could have assured the company's future and recovery from the crisis;
- did not make use of the emergent individual and collective potential of their workforces;
- experienced declining employee relations, accompanied by loss of meaning, stress, disengagement, development of protest networks, and diminished resilience;
- did not develop empathetic or therapeutic relations with society, or provide care and assistance to those in need; and

- experienced a diminished public image, which is the “soft capital” of large, long-established companies.

In this context, depending on circumstances, any major company can find itself turned into a scapegoat.

Toward a Renewal of Anticipatory Socioperception

As outlined above, large companies today face the need to sharpen their socioperception and anticipation capacities. The dominant winds are pushing large, traditionally managed companies to adapt to the evolution of society. At the same time, ordinary people continue to deepen their sense of empathy and their socioperceptive skills. There’s been no reversal to this trend in recent years; quite the contrary, the new socio-economy of meaning and self-adjustment continues to gain ground.

Since the beginning of the century, the backlash against a focus by big companies on maximizing profits with little or no regard for their employees has grown considerably, more so since the economic crisis. Even before then, the intensity of this reaction led a number of observers to anticipate a tipping point. The tacit contract between companies and society has been extended and refined. Today, to be truly successful, a company must attend to the health and well-being of society and the ecological equilibrium of the planet.

Resisting pressure from shareholders for short-term results, a small number of large, traditional companies have shifted to a culture of anticipatory socioperception. They could become models for their peers.

A growing number of company managers who had remained attached to authoritarian, rationalist, and bureaucratic mental models are now questioning the relevance of this mindset in today’s world. The loss of vitality and resilience caused by employee unhappiness and stress, the development of promising opportunities for a decarbonized

economy, and consumers’ hidden desires and expectations have now become subjects of strategic reflection for managers.

Many managers have become sensitive to the presence of change agents within their companies, as well as agents of blockage and protest. The action research for “Ten Years of Organizational Learning” has shown that they see the usefulness of the former and are inclined to support them. An idea worth considering is that if a company becomes more open, blocking agents could become change agents; and if a company remains closed off, the opposite could happen.

The oil, gas, and coal lobbies have considerable influence. They have succeeded, notably in the United States, in throwing doubt on the validity of forecasts of climate change. However, stronger legislation in some areas to make polluters pay is encouraging major oil and chemical producers to bet on sustainable development.

As I write these lines, the future of hyper-financial capitalism is still uncertain. Depending on whether it recovers its full strength or whether it will be tamed sufficiently to serve the economy, short-term financial pressure on companies will increase or dwindle. But even if financial forces remain strong, based on their recent experiences, the ability of companies to resist will probably be greatly strengthened compared to the years between 1990 and 2000.

Taken together, these changes encourage me to anticipate the rapid evolution of large, traditional companies in response to social changes. They will invent ways in which they can make use of the situation. The ones that cling desperately to outdated management styles, organization, and orientation will be negatively affected by the course of events, unless enough of them persist to tip parts of our society into serious disorder. If they want to facilitate their adaptation, they must become socioperceptive. To that end, Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, published an influential

article in *Le Monde* on January 5, 2010, entitled "It is time for CEOs to change from profit-driven logic to public-welfare logic."

Turning the spotlights of socioperception on the company ecosystem and its changes

The company's objective is to feel at ease within its ecosystem and to make the best use of it while also maintaining it. Six sectors seem to me to require particular attention. Many companies neglect several of them.

1. The living company and its teams. Leaders must be aware of their company as a collection of human beings, a grouping with its own health, vitality, efficiency, and resilience. They also need to understand:

- which systems in the company produce unhappiness;
- what positive and negative possibilities for change exist;
- what sort of involvement, creativity, and potential have been left unused and what are the opportunities for making use of them;
- what organization and power structures will be in synergy with the society of people and be able to take root in the firm; and
- what practices develop a collegial atmosphere

Today, five paths to achievement seem to attract particular attention:

- Free up self-organization, reduce rationalized organization by experts, combine self-organization with top-down organization.
- Take into account individuals and categories of individuals, and show respect for people.
- Consider mini-communities and social systems, to reinforce the organic functioning of the company.
- Give support to and wisely position empathetic and socioperceptive leaders.
- Make use of crises to strengthen cohesion and team spirit.

2. Consumers. Companies often base their strategies on superficial views of their customers. They must become aware of their clients' unsatisfied

fundamental needs, frustrated self-development, or deficits left by our business activities. This awareness could lead to new products, services, or systems that are not fashion- or trend-based, and that could enable people to develop the sort of lives that suit them. These activities, in turn, would feed the sustainable development of the company.

What are the social systems that lead consumers to choose or reject this or that product, or such and such a brand? Which ones lead doctors to prescribe or ignore a new medicine? What new pool of potential consumption could open up in the relatively near future in sectors or regions from which we are absent? We need to understand which new products or services could contribute to supporting this or that underlying movement in society's foundations.

3. People and society. Contributing to easing suffering and curing society's pathologies is becoming one of the duties of business (as it is of public authorities and associations). Companies need to find the sources of distress or ineffective processes that are currently or potentially connected to our activities. Understanding their origins and devising interventions or innovations could reduce these challenges.

4. The environment. The transition to a decarbonized economy and the development of links with nature and natural processes could increase the prosperity of many companies and lead to the creation of many jobs. Leaders must sense how their companies can contribute to restoring and maintaining a sustainable equilibrium in the planet's ecosystem, and at the same time develop innovations to assure the vitality of their organizations.

5. The evolving world. Among the plausible future scenarios of the world, on a horizon of 10 to 20 years, leaders need to identify those that would make a real difference for the company and understand how to adapt major strategies to meet and handle uncertainty. By doing so, they will gain an understanding of which of society's major underlying trends could interfere with the company's

development and devise a course of action to deal with them.

6. The financial system. Leaders need to survey the evolution of the financial system, understand the ways in which their company could become dependent on it, and anticipate the steps necessary to escape these pressures.

BOX 1

Foreseeing Societal Dynamics

Foreseeing societal dynamics involves combining foresight and reasoning to produce projections of future trends and strategic analyses that are useful for the company.

Social systems that are strategic for the company, for example, those giving rise to the health or deterioration of teams; those leading to sustainable development or to a decline in the company's market positions; those maintaining the company's well-being within its various environments.

Major trends that are likely to affect the company's development. Locate them, and evaluate the strength and weakness of the processes that generate them. Identify possible fluctuations and the early signs of bifurcations. Evaluate their possible impact on the company.

Scenarios that are significant for the company's future. Scan the principal differences likely to have an impact on our development, such as foreshadowing of threats and happy surprises. Clarify the paths through history that could lead to this or that scenario. The principal outcome of collective work on scenarios is often an increase in the acuity of the participants' socioperceptive skills.

Weak signals. The perception and analysis of events and changes that confirm, describe, or exclude a major trend or scenario is indispensable. This process can lead to the early perception of an emerging phenomenon or a bifurcation. An organization that over the years has accumulated and maintained a deep understanding and perception of the macro and micro social systems that are of strategic importance to it will naturally be sensitive to the weak signals that update its information about change.

Insights into the practice of socioperception

Socioperception is based on *a natural ability of the human brain* to locate significant variables and determine the path to follow or the appropriate action to take when confronted by extremely complex life situations. This skill is imprecise; it involves trial and error and is influenced by circumstances. It is unequally distributed among individuals. A person can cultivate it, allow it to wilt, or even repress it.

This skill implies, as Antonio Damasio has shown, *an intimate collaboration between emotion and reason*.⁸ Be careful not to overuse reason; when we try to make a detailed, rational analysis of a living system, we often end up creating extremely complex interaction diagrams and "hot air factories," and can lose sight of the target of our action. We must constantly seek equilibrium between emotion and reason, empathy and rationalization.

We awaken socioperception through the circumstance of daily life, by sensing and perhaps sharing other's grief or joy. We feel how our interactions with others are going, and we foresee how to intervene. We repeat the experience, tell ourselves stories, create an ad hoc theory of the mind, and observe another interaction. As we repeat the experience, we are enriched, fed by a free-floating but persistent attention to events and changes. We make errors of anticipation and correct them. We take a more or less distant view of these experiences. We test generalizations, noticing that some people react one way, some another. We eventually arrive at theories about society, locate evolutionary trends, and sketch out scenarios (see Box 1).

But skilled socioperceptives tend not to remain at the generalization stage. To sharpen their skill, *they focus their empathetic attention on the lived experiences of real people in their environment*, on the micro social systems that are the bricks of larger systems. They thus spontaneously repeat the approach followed by Kurt Lewin when he developed the field research and techniques of in-depth interviewing, which amplify the capacity

for empathy and socioperception on the part of the researcher. We have met several socioperceptives who have greatly benefited from their participation in Rogerian empathy training sessions. They also think that it is enriching and productive to exercise socioperception within work groups to encourage the proliferation of these skills. A sort of “social biology” develops that examines society not as a thing or a collection of objects, but as a living entity.

Toward a culture of socioperception

In the 19th and the early 20th centuries, socioperception was suppressed by the dominant rationalist culture. Today, the dominant mental models in many companies still hold it in check. The apparent rationality of the authorized version of truth within a company may easily sweep aside the more intuitive truth represented by socioperception. In many management committees, causal analyses and their accompanying facts and figures carry more weight than strategic visions that are perhaps pertinent but have not yet been clothed in rational trappings. Numerous middle and senior managers who exercise socioperceptive skills in their personal and family lives do not do so in their work, because the business culture, work habits, mental models, job definitions, and evaluation systems dissuade them from doing so (see Box 2).

The action research conducted for “Ten Years of Organizational Learning” has shown that, in response to this trend, ground-level reactions and management decisions to correct the situation occur. At the grassroots, change agents build networks of like-minded individuals, strengthening their capacity for resistance and their resilience. Some managers break with the old model by introducing socioperception in certain sectors or departments and then seeking to extend the experience to other areas of the company. Others profit from the radically changed conditions of a crisis situation to encourage a shift. Yet others rely on internal or external change agents to implement a complex strategy of self-transformation over an extended period.

BOX 2

Different Ways of Not Being Socioperceptive

Ultimately, the least socioperceptive person is someone who is severely autistic. Otherwise, those who are not socioperceptive are poor at decoding facial expressions, tones of voice, or the emotions of others: They have little empathy. In daily life, they use analytic and rational brain circuits rather than those that process emotions, intuitions, patterns, and systems. Such people perceive the other as belonging to a class, category, or camp, as if completely steered by a certain logic or ideology, rather than as a unique person with complex motivations. Non-socioperceptive people always rely on rational analyses of the situation, lists or models they have in their heads, the conventions of their milieu, and the idea they have of their function. On the other hand, someone who is socioperceptive, if he or she is at all skilled, will sense the action best suited to the circumstances.

There are also people who, unlike those described above, are relatively empathetic but whose interpersonal empathy has not (or not yet) given rise to a systemic social empathy. Empathetic in their daily personal lives, they maintain attitudes regarding company life and/or social and political life that are based on rationalist, analytical, authoritarian, or ideological images. In their daily interpersonal relations, they perceive others, find ways of adjusting to them, and sense quite accurately how to act to evolve their relationships in the direction they want. But when they are bosses faced with employees, they behave as they think bosses should behave, rather than as people faced with other people. And employees do the same. When examining the social situations they want to change, they act according to authoritarian models (at the risk of provoking undesirable effects) or according to the dominant stereotypes in their immediate environments. Alternatively, they throw themselves into a mechanistic analysis in the search for a causal agent on which they can act.

Some businesses have a living culture of socioperception and anticipation. Their organization is more organic than rational. They seek to understand and where possible exploit the processes likely to facilitate or hamper their development and fulfillment. Senior managers’ activities focus

BOX 3

Examples of Practices That Encourage Socioperception in a Company

We have observed a variety of such practices. Here are a few examples:

- **Pamper the socioperceptives** by locating, selecting, protecting, encouraging, and positioning them.
- **Get feedback from action or experience** by having those who participated meet to go over what happened and draw lessons for the future.
- **Conduct postmortems** by inviting a group of socioperceptives to examine the company's innovations, whether successes or setbacks, and derive lessons that are likely to be useful in other sectors or circumstances (as is done with the analysis of airplane accidents).
- **Install a socio-anthropology laboratory** in the company.
- **Hold interaction sessions** between researchers from R&D and socio-anthropologists.
- **Launch a socioperceptive group** (permanent or ad hoc) focused on a task or problem, for example, the discovery of the possible impact of this or that major trend on our development, or the identification and interpretation of indications of change recently observed by the participants.
- **Construct future scenarios** especially adapted to the company's situation.
- **Create a worldwide network of socioperceptives** focusing on the company's areas of strategic interest.
- **Install observation and watch systems** (economic, sociological, technological).
- **Connect with external think tanks.**
- **Conduct socio-anthropological field research** centered on understanding the social systems that are strategically interesting for the company. If you can sufficiently reveal their underlying dynamics, you can perceive their evolutionary possibilities (scenarios), which can clarify opportunities for strategic action.
- **Install a company analysis and evaluation center** with a variety of connections inside and outside the organization, accumulating and maintaining understanding of important social systems.

on reinforcing both the vitality of the company and its ability to rapidly respond to the circumstances whose dynamics they are trying to control. Socioperception and anticipation are subjects for recurring dialogue and evaluation; groups talk about them first, then try to make them work at different levels within the company. All personnel are brought into the efforts to anticipate the company's future. They experience a collective pleasure in accurately analyzing and anticipating, and in sharing their understanding of errors. In areas that the company considers to be strategic, it establishes systems of surveillance and investigation. Socioperceptive senior and middle managers are numerous and highly valued. The company organizes structures for collective socioperception (permanent or ad hoc) (see Box 3).

In certain companies, many managers and personnel have a systemic vision of things. They have learned that anticipation is always uncertain and that accurately forecasting the future is impossible. Instead, they grope their way forward by approximative actions, characteristic of the logic of living things. They respect error as a source of experience and learning. Rather than folding in on themselves, these businesses are socioperceptive agents of change linked to a variety of external networks. ■

January 2010



Sophie Juin

Alain de Vulpian in February 2009 conducts a seminar, “How to become catalysts of change.”

ENDNOTES

- 1 Cofremca is a team of sociologists created by the author in 1954. It principally serves as an observatory of socio-cultural change and a laboratory for future-oriented action for companies, administrations, and governing bodies.
- 2 Elias, N. (1939). *Über den prozess der Zivilisation*. Translated into English in two volumes: *The Civilizing Process*, Vol. I. *The History of Manners*. Blackwell, 1969. *The Civilizing Process*, Vol. II. *State Formation and Civilization*. Blackwell, 1982. *The Civilizing Process. Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. Revised 1994 edition. Blackwell, 2000.
- 3 de Vulpian, A. (2008). *Towards the Third Modernity: How Ordinary People Are Transforming the World*, Triarchy Press. This book refers to this research and analyzes the process of modernization that is currently under way.
- 4 For example, in the 1990s, Giacomo Rizzolatti, director of the department of neuroscience at the University of Palermo, identified and described the role of mirror neurons. See also note 7.
- 5 The neurologist Antonio Damasio has shown that humans do not maintain the ability to pilot their lives in a well-informed manner unless the rational and emotional parts of the brain work together. See his book *Descartes' Error: Emotions, Reason and the Human Brain*, A. Grosset-Putnam Books, 1994.
- 6 Riesman, D. (1950). *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. Yale University Press.
- 7 Recent work on oxytocin supports this hypothesis. This neuromodulator improves the quality of empathy; it reinforces links between mother and child; it increases interpersonal and social confidence; it reduces certain forms of stress and seems to be a bonding facilitator in pairing relationships. Caresses and orgasm stimulate its production. It seems that among children deprived of affection and human touch (brought up in orphanages), the neuronal circuits that use oxytocin are disturbed.
- 8 Op. cit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alain de Vulpian is a socio-anthropologist and the founder of Cofremca, RISC, and Sociovision. He has dedicated his professional life to conducting action research, observing the evolution of western societies, and designing humane interventions. His book *Towards the Third Modernity: How Ordinary People Are Transforming the World*, Triarchy Press, 2008, evokes this work. Since his retirement, Alain has continued to research topics of general interest. He is vice president of SoL France.

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