

The Way In

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Putting the People Back in Purpose

Somewhere along the way, we got the idea that “work” should be somehow socially different than the rest of “life”—that concern for well-being, relationships, dreams had no place in the workplace or in our schools, medical establishments, and government halls, and instead the human side of our being should be subjugated to task, to the execution of the work itself. Work developed its own ‘rules’ and sets of relationships, quite outside of familial or community ways of being. More, work came to have its own reason for being, its own purpose, outside of us: in business, typically for the generation of profit; in education, for the achievement of rigidly defined academic standards; in government and civil society for power. The people, whether customers, employees, patients, students, or citizens, were left out of the purpose equation—so much so that whole bodies of theory and practice have had to be reinvented so as to remind us of the fact of them! That these so-called “customer-oriented” (or “student-centered” or “patient-centered”) movements often fail to change results much is an indicator that more than a reminder is needed; we need to reinsert humanity back into the purpose of work. The sudden increase in the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), now estimated at over 28,000 worldwide, seems to indicate a growing desire for humanitarian types of work; yet the people-purposes are often obscured in the face of daily challenges—wading through a sea of bureaucratic and economic obstacles causes us to place our attention on the challenge of executing even the most routine tasks, on process, not people. How do we move the ‘real work’—that which serves people—back to the center of our attention, and keep it there?

It has been widely held that over-emphasis on external facets of work—the structures, processes, technologies, tasks we perform—has been the result of long-held, deeply ingrained mental models (world views) that were developed in the sciences by Descartes and Newton, and embedded during the Industrial Revolution, the ‘machine age’. Institutions were designed based on machine-like views of how life was thought to function—parts that could be configured to produce certain results; and in the process, humanity was left out. Religious institutions and the dwindling arts were the only surviving mainstream collective domains for humanity to know and grapple with itself. Because neither religion nor the arts have tended to wield global power equal to that which has been produced via capitalism and big business, our attention has shifted even more to work and the results it produces, that which produces wealth. As we struggle to deal with the complexity of results-producing work in an evermore complex global economy, amid the often turbulent interrelationships among nation states and their unpredictable societies, the response has often been to step up the pressure by trying to eek out increasing amounts of productivity (more results) with fewer resources. Whether in business or education, government or non-governmental agencies, there are few who are escaping the extreme cost-cutting and resource constraints now widely deployed. The price we are paying in terms of the health and well-being of people has been enormous, and shows no signs of diminishing. And yet it is hard to find a leader in any of these institutions who believes the current practices are sustainable.

New Forms to Follow New Functions

While the mechanistic practices developed during the Industrial Revolution might have served the nature of work during that time well, the world has changed quite a lot since then—science has long since moved on from Descartes’ machine world, yet the majority of us in other fields have not. Why should we expect the same practices to work under the very different conditions of the present? Most leaders I talk to today know that our approaches are sorely out of synch with current realities. And yet we persist in emphasizing highly mechanistic structural solutions to solving our problems. While some innovative approaches are being experimented with, these are most often applied on a small scale, and for special projects, not to ongoing work. When trying to improve the performance of large systems, or of the collective who engages regularly in repeating types of work, we tend to rely on the structural solutions. We reengineer processes and policies, restructure organizations and enterprises, outsource and offshore, reconfigure information systems and technologies, and yet with little to no result: over 70% of change initiatives fail. People are picking up the slack, but can hardly be expected to continue doing so at the current rate.

The old saying goes: Form follows function. Our ‘functions’ have changed, yet our forms have not. We talk about the age of the “knowledge worker,” yet organize people as if they were working on a 19th century manufacturing assembly line. We advocate “innovation” and “adaptability” to enable us to better respond to rapidly changing often large-scale shifts in the global environment, yet continue to employ hierarchical authority and command-and-control modes of management that are completely antithetical to change and the creative capacity in us which is required to adapt and innovate. While most leaders acknowledge this contradiction in their approaches versus the outcomes they wish to generate, the question remains: to what extent are they willing to give up control, and what does this ‘letting go’ imply in terms of the role of leaders in organizations today?

The work being conducted to develop new forms to serve our new functions seems to be yielding some hopeful alternatives to the prevailing hierarchical structures in place in most large institutions today. Building on the concepts of self-organization as explored through contemporary sciences, the phenomena of “social networks” that arise outside of formal structure is being widely explored as a new means of organization that might circumvent the limitations of hierarchical structure. More recently, the concept of “hastily-formed networks” seem to be breaking the command-and-control, machine view by advocating *minimal* structure that would give the flexibility needed for humans to adapt and innovate.

Hastily-formed Networks

Hastily-formed network (HFN) is a term coined by the Naval Postgraduate School to describe the multi-organization groups that come together to create coordinated action in crises, such as hurricane Katrina, the December 2004 tsunami, and the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center. These multiple groups—the firefighters and police officers, the military and local government, civilians and non-governmental agencies—must somehow quickly mobilize in response to crises. The challenge for HFN is that all of the different groups of responders must be able to take “coordinated action” *collectively*, to adapt and innovate under rapidly changing, uncertain conditions, and to do so *without centralized authority*, and without a common set of information, skills, protocols, and processes. Whereas most responders operate well within their own hierarchical structures, analysis of disaster response efforts reveals that collaboration across groups is often ineffective or absent.

Disaster response is only one example of a situation in which multiple organizations must respond to a shared challenge; HFN occur in many other contexts as well—whenever cross-functional, cross-company, or cross-sector groups must take “coordinated action” in response to a new, unfamiliar challenge, and somehow generate an innovation that enables them to deal with the challenge. The question being explored is: what can we learn from the alternative structures and types of leadership being developed for HFN so as to enable adaptive and innovative coordinated action within and across our own institutions? In exploring that question, members of a global learning community, Society for Organizational Learning, in conjunction with researchers from the Naval Post Graduate School, formed two hypotheses:

Minimal structures can better enable both self-organization and coordinated action; generative systems can transcend context.

A system (defined here as the set of language, roles, structures, processes, and practices that organize individual and collective action) can fail when key elements are missing, such as when infrastructure is damaged by a natural disaster, or when “foreign” subsystems are combined but operate independently of one another—parts without a whole. One tragic example is recounted in Peter Denning’s research about HFN, in which he describes analysis of the disaster response efforts after the attack on the World Trade Center: New York Police Department (NYPD) helicopters that had been monitoring conditions by circling the towers had observed signs of structural collapse in the North Tower and immediately issued an emergency evacuation order to all police; however, they failed to inform the firefighters, who, having had no warning, were not evacuated. There’s no doubt that both the NYPD and the firefighters performed heroically, beyond what most of us might imagine possible. And, by most accounts, the command-and-control hierarchies that governed each independently also functioned quite well in guiding independent action. The example raises the question, however, about how to shift independent action to interdependent collaboration across groups when there is no super-structure to support it. The same question applies to corporations, governments, schools, and healthcare systems, where complex webs of multi-stakeholder relationships are needed to design, produce, and deliver products or services, in ways that can require a high degree of innovation to deal with often sudden and large-scale changes in policy, technology, funding, consumer preferences, and societal or competitive dynamics, or when persisting challenges require the collaboration of multiple institutions.

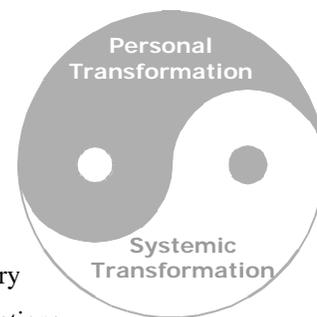
Fixed structures provide clarity and order, but usually only within the finite contexts for which they were designed; they can easily fail us when new conditions arise, catastrophic or otherwise. They are contextually confined. As many of us have experienced in business, contexts like globalization present an ever-evolving and highly complex challenge on a scale that traditionally centralized structures struggle to address. Fixed structures also typically operate via centralized, hierarchical authority; when multiple stakeholder groups are needed, there is no central authority, rendering the whole less effective. Attempts at creating superstructures that can govern multiple stakeholder groups often fail, as we saw with the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in its efforts to coordinate interagency action during the response to hurricane Katrina—an abominable failure that resulted in delayed relief and unnecessary loss of life. Although improvements to superstructures like FEMA can no doubt be made, the feeling is that the inherent limits of hierarchical structures may continue to impede multi-stakeholder response. Thus, rather than overlaying superstructures to govern multiple stakeholders, the hypothesis is that employing *minimal* structures such as those used in improvisatory systems in the arts might enable greater degrees of self-organization and adaptability to new contexts.

Enhanced performance of multi-stakeholder systems must occur on both the individual and collective levels.

Implicit in this hypothesis is the assumption that systemic transformation is dependent upon personal transformation. Dispensing with the familiar roles, structures, and rules in order to enable new forms to emerge can require deep personal will and courage, as well as new ways of being as a collective. The challenge here is that our mental models and, consequently, our actions have been shaped by mechanistic systems, often from our early school-age years and continuing through most of our professional lives. Our behaviors become habituated, deeply embedded, making personal change very difficult. We will need to do deep work in “de-mechanizing” our *selves* in order to participate in a large, dynamic, and generative field of change.

NB: The above is taken from an article I wrote that was originally published by the Society for Organization Learning (SoL) in their May 2006 *Reflections* journal, based on work I conducted with members of the SoL community and NPS, inspired by the research of Peter Denning at NPS.

Whether ‘crises’ are defined by temporary, catastrophic events like natural disasters, or the often more subtle but persisting crises that plague many of our communities, businesses, schools, and healthcare systems, what is perhaps most interesting about the HFN research is the emphasis on *both* the structural and the personal dimensions of large system change. While the exploration of the uses of ‘minimal structures’ in HFN may yield some hopeful alternatives to uses of fixed structures and hierarchical controls to govern collective action, the structural starting point in isolation of the personal dimension would be suspect—structure, no matter how fixed or fluid, echoes the very machine mental models we wish to dispel in that it starts from the external manifestations of relationship (structure) when a more human-centered approach might start from within. Indeed, as the story of student response in the wake of the shooting of Eddie Lopez indicates, profound collective transformation and innovation tend to arise in the *absence* of structure, because it is absent. In some cases, such as the disaster response efforts during World Trade Center tragedy, it is the structure that was intended to ensure control that caused the breakdown—had the NYPD been trained and accustomed to working not in their functional, agency silos but rather as collaborative units with other responders, they might have thought to warn the firefighters in time. While we tend to see structures as devices to help us work together, they more often than not enforce unintentional walls that divide us, physically, mentally, and spiritually.



The View from the Middle of the Mess

We are stuck in the structural quagmire of messes of our own making. When you’re stuck, the view from the middle of the quagmire doesn’t change much. So we keep re-enacting the same rituals, perhaps with some minor adjustments, over and over as if somehow the mere repetition will change the outcome. But, of course, it doesn’t. The view from the middle of the mess takes us over, so we see only the challenges at hand, the crises to handle, channeling so much of our attention, time, resources into dealing with the complex webs of obstacles in the existing quagmire that we have little or no space left to try to figure out how to get ourselves out of it, once and for all—we spend our time ‘putting out fires’ and applying ‘band aids’ that don’t solve the problem, but merely (hopefully) keep it from getting worse. When confronted with the same harsh realities day after day, these reinforce the very mental models that keep us stuck—we can’t ‘see’ alternatives that might get us out of the mess, and develop literal ‘blind spots’. And then we retreat, trying to deal with the pieces of the whole that seem manageable—a little change here, an improvement there. These improvements, no doubt, can make a difference. But when what we have been doing in bits and pieces to effect change isn’t working (i.e., the same messes persist), we’re forced again to try to tackle the whole darn thing!

One way to shift the view from the middle of the mess is to look at the many ‘parts’ of the whole system, and try to understand how each part affects the other, and the health of the whole. This approach, known as “systems thinking”, has been an evolving practice for some time, with some wonderful results. Leaders in business who practice systems thinking are learning to see the complex interdependencies among different departments, work groups, or processes, and to use that knowledge to approach change not by trying to fix problems in isolation, but by dealing with the ‘whole’ in ways that can strengthen the parts. Likewise, in large social system change efforts, such as in education system reform, leaders of schools, local government,

law enforcement, and student advocate groups are working together across institutional boundaries to try to address systemic issues, such as low performance of segments of the student population. Yet the cases where these multi-stakeholder initiatives succeed—or, are even attempted—are all too few. Why? Focusing on purely structural solutions from within the current reality can reinforce the same mental models that have been producing limiting results. The second we start to use words that define current structures and systems—“school” or “government”, “law enforcement” or “medical center”, for example—we often inadvertently put up institutional walls that inhibit whole system change. And, just like the well-intended NYPD in response to the World Trade Center Disaster, the very structure we act within limits our ‘seeing’ of the situation to our own, narrowly defined roles—we respond in terms of function or agency, through practices designed for us alone. While systems thinking helps us to see all the interrelationships among the various parts of a system, ‘seeing’ these doesn’t necessarily help us behave any differently. We simply do not know how to perform as an ensemble of players, each within his or her own role, to enact a shared ‘play’. In systems where ‘crises’ are persisting for long periods of time, our mental models about ‘the way things are’ take hold, and then we inadvertently either reinforce or invent the very obstacles we wish to overcome. In systems where there is conflict among the leaders of different institutions, often the natural impulse is to shore up the walls! Thus, perhaps we need to learn to see the quagmire not only from the point of view of *outside* the system, looking in, but also from the *inside* of our first-person experience of it, to then look out. And, before attempting to ‘fix’ the structures that guide our interaction, perhaps we need to begin by building the relationships needed to carry us across existing boundaries.

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Playing Nice Vs. Taking Your Toys and Going Home

A friend of mine was head of housing for the city of Los Angeles when the devastating Northridge earthquake hit. With over 50,000 housing units damaged or destroyed, their response was deemed a success. He was recently asked by city officials what it was about their response to the disaster that worked so well, and he commented, “The Northridge housing response was effective because it bypassed the rigid bureaucratic structures and operated through a fast growing organic network based on relationships and individual initiative. Key people, from the lowest echelon, stepped up to respond to myriad issues and resolved them through creativity and personal connections to other departments (police, fire, building and safety), public sector entities (banks, consultants, associations), and the federal government (HUD and the Clinton Administration). The key organizational structure was a large conference table in the General Manager’s office. Anyone who was active and effective would join in meetings at the table. Technology was primitive. There was no email. Cell phones worked intermittently and were not in general use. Key staff had pagers. The most important communication device was the land line telephone. The most important vehicle for communicating to groups was the squawk box. People that were effective were those that had extensive relationships and good communication skills and who would pick up the phone to reach out to anyone in any agency and be tenacious about it.”

Another friend, an engineer who was involved in a large-scale, multi-sector, multi-country disaster response simulation, “Strong Angel”, described a very different response. Many of the world’s leading technology and communications companies had been invited to participate in the simulation, for the purpose of testing and strengthening communications abilities in ‘austere’ conditions, where power was down and existing systems either non-functioning or severely strained by new demands. He explained that some vendors, whose solutions weren’t working, literally “took their toys and went home.” (It is interesting to note that the first technology to work was the Hamm radio.) Those who stayed to continue the simulation, rather than collaborate with competitors to come up with a joint solution, literally “stood with their backs to each other.

In reflecting on what he had observed during the simulation, my engineering friend said that one of the most important factors in determining the success or failure of situations where multiple institutions are involved is “leadership”. In commenting about the Northridge response, my housing friend later said, “We were practicing HFN management without the computer networks. It still worked—for a while. Then order triumphed over organic process and we returned to ‘business as usual’.”

We all know of or have experienced both the successes and failures of multiple groups coming together to deal with a challenge. Yet, we don’t seem to know much about the variables that affect success—it’s safe to say the answer is probably not limited to technology! How do we create spaces where people deny the tendency to ‘take their toys and go home’? How do we get groups in conflict or even simple avoidance to bring their ‘toys’ to the table to begin with? And when we do overcome boundaries to work together to solve a shared problem, what does it take to sustain those relationships and heightened ways of being, to avoid returning to ‘business as usual’? For me and many others who deal in situations of *persisting* crises, the “leadership” and “relationship” questions are also central. So, many of us have started asking ourselves:

- ⇒ What types of leadership are required to *forge* relationships across institutional or constituent boundaries?
- ⇒ When effective in working collaboratively for even a short while, whether in response to crisis or through a special project, what is needed to *sustain* those relationships over time?
- ⇒ If ‘leaders’ are defined as anyone who shows up at the ‘conference table’, what can we do to prepare them and ourselves for the challenge—before, during, and after ‘crises’?