

**Ongoing Discussion “Thought Piece”**

*Jacob’s Ladder (Chapter 1 of “Making a Whole New World”)*

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# Change of Level – on Jacob's ladder

**Background: This is chapter one of my book, *Making a Whole New World*. It considers the shift from organisation as mechanism to organisation as organism. It outlines a framework of levels of perception and the transformations between them. It looks at leadership as a systemic attribute that facilitates the flow between levels and hence creates value in the world, enabling people to transform themselves by learning to participate.**

Jacob left Beersheba, and went toward Haran. He came to the place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! -----  
Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it."

*The Book of Genesis*

## Organisation

Are we, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, struggling to be fulfilled because we are encumbered by outdated concepts? For the most part, our inherited ideas about organisations were formed in the industrial revolution. The model on which organisations were designed was the very machines which made that revolution possible: the clockwork mechanism and, later, the steam engine, the weaving frame, and all the gadgets that followed. Our organisations are concerned with power transmission and seen as gear chains and lever mechanisms or latterly as programs and interfaces - vast devices that

enable a small elite to wield great power. Strangely we see our reflection in our artefacts and the metaphors embedded in our language make it hard to escape our past.

In the modern world, we have learned to deal in parts, in fragments and in the immediate and have derived considerable benefits from so doing. However, our mental processes permit us to delude ourselves and others, because we conveniently overlook what joins us, what fills the space between us. We tolerate waste and destruction because, in the short term, there may be no obvious unwanted consequences of our actions. Because we will not be around to reap the long-term bitter harvest of the crop our selfishness has sown (Climate change, global warming and rising sea levels may be only the beginning) we assume it can be ignored. Our goals appear to justify our means. We do not hold ourselves accountable to future generations, to people outside our social milieu or other beings with whom we share the planet. Our lack of appreciation of the wholeness of nature is what makes it possible for us to play along with the current insanity of the world.

### **Mechanism or organism?**

Although it will no doubt always have its place, the mechanistic model of organisation is now being discredited as a panacea because it is less and less able to cope with aspects of our complex and fast-changing world. Many years ago, when I first read Gareth Morgan's *Metaphors of Organisation*, I was particularly impressed by his emphasis on shift towards organisations as organisms. It is only latterly that it has come home to me that this is more than mere metaphor. An organisation has the potential to come to life - truly to be a living entity.

Let's take a simple definition of a life-form as a bounded relationship of diverse components inextricably linked together to survive autonomously. It remains unchanged by the external environment from which it takes what it needs and to which it discards what it does not need, in order to sustain its inner environment.

The biologists, Maturana and Varela (*Tree of Knowledge*) explain more fully the continuity between the evolution of the second order coupling of cells (thus forming organisms) and their third order aggregation into meta-systems (organisms combining as social structures): cells are first order, organisms are second order and societies are third order. In an organism the individual cells have no autonomy whereas in a social system, the individuals have autonomy and, through language, can *choose* to work together for the greater good. As a simple example, observe a flock of birds. Nobody gives the orders yet they synchronise their movements, they flow across the landscape and avoid obstacles. With their many tiny brains they achieve collectively intelligent and appropriate performance.

The legal entity we call an organisation, with its systems, is a mechanism and yet, as it is inhabited by human beings, it has the possibility of becoming a living social system. It would seem, then, that seeing organisations as living entities is not a metaphor but an aspiration.

What binds the parts of a machine is the structure of control, whereas what unites the parts of an organism is mutual interdependence. Each is concerned with tangible outcomes but they choose to achieve them through fundamentally different ways.

What distinguishes mechanistic organisations from organismic ones is that the former

focus on structural means for achieving external ends, whereas the latter seek to achieve those ends through processes that sustain mutual well-being.

According to Bateson *“Logic and quantity turn out to be inappropriate devices for describing organisms with their interactions and internal organisation” (Mind and Nature, p21)*. Of course they do, and this is something that frustrates the evolution of organisations from mechanism to organism. We create something organic, vibrant and dynamic and then we apply logical reasoning and quantitative target-setting until all life is expelled and we are left with nothing more than a machine.

In a machine, although all the parts fit together and perform their respective roles, the whole is always in some way less than the sum of its parts, whereas in an organism, when life enters, the whole is more than the sum of the parts. ‘Life’ is what makes the difference and life comes about through intention. Life requires the ‘will to live’. This is a choice or decision we each make in relation to our own life, and will one day let go of. For an organisation to have the will to live requires a number of people to unite their will in common cause.

Much of my own work is in helping management teams to enhance their effectiveness. A good start is for them to define and align themselves to their common purpose, which creates a shared identity. Identity – knowing who I am – is, it seems, a fundamental prerequisite to effective action. Identity comes from a focus of our intent – a decisive act of will that makes us responsible for what we are doing or, perhaps more accurately, what we are being. Only when our common purpose is

clearly articulated and visible to all of us, can we be sure of our common identity.

This focus of intent enables us to transcend the machine, opening up the possibility that we can collectively become an organism. All organisms are mortal – they are born, live their lives and die. Sometimes such life is very short. For instance, a single one-night performance, might determine the life-cycle of a theatrical group. In other cases, for instance that of a successful enterprise, it can be prolonged for years.

Arie de Geus, points out that most organisations, even very well-known and successful ones, have a life-expectancy of no more than 30 years. (*The Living Company*, published by Nicholas Brealey). He describes the characteristics of those rare companies which manage to achieve longevity. The first of these seems to be the intention to do so – the will to live! Hugh Montgomery, whose medical research on Everest revealed a number of factors that affect the ability to survive, of which the will to live is of critical importance.

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way”

**Viktor Frankl**  
*Man's Search for Meaning (p75)*

Next comes selection of a suitable focus of intent. Just as, as individuals, we might choose a reckless course and fail, so too, as organisations we need to weigh the risks and choose a course that stretches us without destroying us. Seeking and responding to challenge is in the nature of living life to the full. Bold entrepreneurial endeavour provides such challenge, giving zest and life to organisations that creatively respond.

### **Leadership is life-giving**

We hear a lot of talk these days about such notions as empowerment, engagement, devolution, outsourcing etc. At the same time, innovations like partnership, supply-chain management and new styles of teamwork and leadership, are experiments in a meta-level of relationships. These are not merely current fads or isolated phenomena but are all aspects of a changing pattern - aspects of the wave of change.

Leadership is a word we think we understand. However, most of our understanding and much common usage of the word is embedded in the language of mechanistic control and command hierarchies rather than organic forms of organisation. We might consider an alternative idea: that leadership is what brings relationships to life. In so doing it enables people to freely choose to subsume their independence in favour of inter-dependence. Such choosing is an act of will.

So we might come to an understanding of leadership as being that which engages people in the life-flow of an organisation and thereby maintains its life. Such leadership is systemic rather than being attributable only to certain individuals. With systemic leadership, people in positions of authority can be free from the expectation that they alone will be the life-givers. It is particularly liberating when everyone finds themselves free to contribute to the flow through their own individual acts of leadership.

Effective leadership is about raising levels of achievement, which implies actually transforming people as well as their results. It requires a field of endeavour that is

challenging. It is mostly this outer aspect of leadership which pre-occupies people in commerce and industry, yet outer challenge and inner development are inseparable.

### **Out of control**

The mechanistic model of organising was appropriate to the industrial age that spawned it. Its aim was to provide a system of control of the many by a few, in order to achieve predictable outcomes. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in order to handle increasing complexity and emergent phenomena, society is evolving towards a post-industrial organic model embracing diversity, divergence and learning. For self-organising systems to operate, they require freedom from external control. For this there is no option but to let go of our dependence upon control and command hierarchies. In spite of the delusions of politicians, self-organisation cannot come about while control is being exercised. The two systems are antipathetic.

The Darwinian principle suggests that species that fail to adapt fast enough to changes in their environment will become extinct. Arie de Geus's research for Shell, referred to above, showed that relatively few organisations have a lifespan in excess of 30 years – most successful multi-nationals live for 40 to 50. Only rare examples live more than 100 years and a very few have survived much longer. Firstly, then, you might consider whether your own organisation has passed its sell-by date. Secondly, as Arie de Geus points out, those that live a long time do so by re-inventing themselves – not by battening down the hatches and waiting for the storms of change to pass by. If your organisation is not learning and changing it is becoming an anachronism.



### **Progress against nature**

People in organisations often experience a tension between, on the one hand, an awareness that all is not well and, on the other, an inability to bear the uncertainty of seeking an alternative. Letting go the old can be a terrifying prospect, as it implies loss of control. Paradoxically, it is an apparent loss of control that makes us aware that change is needed. Managers in such circumstances experience inner turmoil and rising stress. Many work harder and harder in the belief it is helping the situation, but they are being drawn inexorably towards self-annihilation. It is human nature, apparently, to cling to the old and change, then, has to be against nature.

“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

**George Bernard Shaw**

*Man and Superman*

There are cries for help because it is clear that the way we have always done things may no longer be effective. What is it that people in organisations are hankering after when they talk of the need for a ‘change of level’ or for ‘raising the game’? These aspirations are rarely coupled with an understanding of what they might mean in practice. If they are to be acted upon effectively, people need to be clear about what is possible and what it takes to achieve it.

So what might they mean? Understanding enables us to recognise patterns of change or changes of pattern, by which we can really know what is going on. This kind of ‘seeing’, this special kind of perception, is the seeing of strategists. We are challenged to detach ourselves from involvement in the overwhelming volume of information and knowledge, in order to see as strategists do – to grasp the “big

picture” – to see the changing pattern of unfolding events. We cannot afford to ignore the detail but we must rise above it. As leaders of change, it is vital we lead from the high ground of strategic thinking. How can we give people a sense of direction if we are down there with them, embroiled in operations and, as it were, up to our armpits in grease?

### **Another dimension?**

There is a story, told by Edwin Abbott, in his book called *Flatland*, published in 1884, that suggests the nature of the difference. The story describes a two-dimensional world populated by two-dimensional beings, whose perceptions are very different from those of three-dimensional beings such as ourselves living in a three-dimensional world. In their world there is no concept of solid objects so, for instance, a sphere passing through their world is experienced as a dot which becomes a widening circular obstruction and then reduces again until it mysteriously vanishes. Similarly, other inexplicable phenomena occur to the flatlanders. The third dimension is not visible to the beings of this two-dimensional world but many of them have theories about it. Those who actually believe that a third dimension could actually be a possibility tend to be derided as superstitious mystics by their fellow flatlanders.

We are similarly blind to higher possibilities because we are bound by our current perceptions. The world we know so well and would consider to be ‘reality’ is no more than a construct we have inherited and which is sustained by our language, customs and beliefs.

Fritjof Capra (in his book, *The Web of Life*) speaks of “a constellation of concepts, values, perceptions and practices shared by a community, which forms a particular vision of reality that is the basis of the way the community organises itself” – in other words it is the construct of the moment and it too will pass. There is no objective reality.

### **The world is what we think it is**

We may hanker to be more effective but we cannot change just by working harder at the same old things. If we are to get a step-change in performance, then there needs to be a change in our perceptions so that we work in quite different ways, coming, in effect, under different laws and experiencing different degrees of freedom. This is a strange idea for those of us brought up to think that science describes a world of well-ordered facts. A little exploration reveals that even the ‘most obvious’ of these so-called facts are shaped by the mind-set that sets out to discover them. All science is subject to change and, in any case, explains only what science can explain, leaving all other phenomena (the vast majority) with “no scientific explanation”. And yet we all have other-worldly experiences. The experience of realms of existence with more freedom is almost commonplace but rarely recognised.

### **Worlds of perception**

All humans live in many different worlds of experience and have the capacity for logical abstraction. We are rooted in the concrete world of our senses – so-called physical reality - but also experience the worlds of feelings, of thought, of ideas, of emergent patterns and ultimately, notwithstanding a healthy scepticism, encounter spiritual experiences. This often happens simultaneously and we confuse ourselves

and others as we move between worlds yet use the same language, most commonly confusing thoughts and emotions. The expression "as above, so below" relates to the principle by which the more abstract worlds contain the more concrete. For example, what I *believe* will be apparent in the way I *behave*. My rational mind is confined to the more concrete worlds whereas the more abstract domains must be perceived directly.

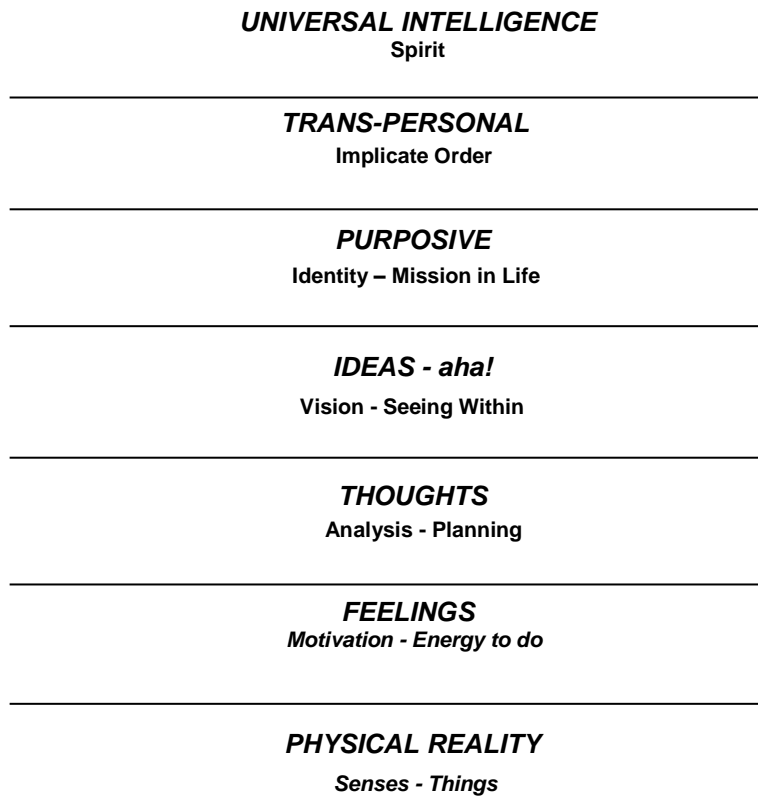
Behaviour, being the way we manifest in the world (something we do every minute of our lives and cannot withhold) can be changed artificially by various devices but authentic behaviour has its roots in our values and beliefs. When we manipulate or oppress people we can change their behaviour temporarily. As soon as the controlling force is removed their old behaviour will tend to re-establish itself. However, when our beliefs change, our behaviour changes accordingly and permanently. When we speak of keeping body and soul together, are we not, perhaps unconsciously, alluding to the maintenance of our integrity across the spectrum of the worlds or our perceptions?

“If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to collect wood, assign tasks and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the endless immensity of the sea”

**Antoine de Saint Exupery**  
*The Wisdom of the Sands*

I have found the metaphysical notion of 'worlds of perception', explained below, to be very useful in providing a language for the idea of "changing level". It also defines, with a useful degree of precision, some of the words we need in order to

describe our inner experiences. It can be the basis of a life philosophy and a metaphysical schema of great power.



I hasten to say that, although this is not ‘the truth’ (what, after all, is truth?) it nevertheless provides a valuable way of exploring and charting perceptions and possibilities. As a kind of map, it can be useful to anyone seriously exploring their inner potential. It provides a temporary and approximate truth to enable them to progress.

Every human has access to all these worlds of perception but to be free to move between worlds we need to become more aware, more conscious and more mature. As human beings we all have similar possibilities and we have all, to some extent, already experienced each of these worlds. Where such experience has been fleeting,

we may not have fully apprehended its significance and may even deny it altogether.

To overcome this, we have to intentionally open ourselves to the possibilities and temporarily suspend our disbelief.

Although we can inhabit all of these worlds, in which all of us are potentially present all of the time, we often limit ourselves to the more concrete and neglect the others.

There are many aspects of modern living which dull us down, with the result that we have to make a conscious effort if we are to maintain our awareness. We will need to develop the 'higher organs of perception' necessary if we are to be free to perceive at each level. Personal development is a process of inner growth, or maturation, by which we gain freedom to move between these worlds at will. (Note, this definition of personal development is far from common usage, in which the notion of personal development mostly describes career paths or social adjustment).

We can have flashes of insight, inspiration or intuition, which evaporate all too quickly. Thus we need to persist in our enquiry and in seeking illumination. There is a saying, 'man is not a human being trying to be spiritual but a spiritual being trying to be human'. That makes sense to me, based on my life experience, so forgive me if it sounds fanciful or even pretentious to you. Don't let your reaction to my words obstruct your own journey. That would be to deny your potential, which is without limit.

So now let us look at the Worlds of Perception, one by one, noting once more that this framework simply provides a basis of enquiry – a way of interpreting experience.

## **Sensing**

As we are physical beings, our sense organs bring us information from the physical world 'out there'. These sensory perceptions are arguably the only primary source from which we construct our lives or 'bring forth our worlds'. Indeed, our image of the world we are in, is largely formed in our very early years through impressions gathered by our sense organs. It is this sensory information we come to view as the 'real' world, and onto our childhood foundation of language and culture, we graft complex structures which have no real claim to represent reality – they are merely constructs of the mind.

Conversely all action takes place in this world of things, provided we are motivated to act. We learn to see the fruits of action in this physical concrete world. The child delights in the way its hand can cause lights to sparkle from its toy. In management terms, it is in this world we manifest the measurable results which are the stuff of target-setting. Indeed we can act nowhere else but in the physical domain. Such action is what others see as our behaviour and we are behaving in some fashion, sleeping or waking, from the time we are conceived until we draw our last breath.

## **Feeling**

A different world that we perceive directly, is the world of our feelings or emotions. As that word implies, this is a world rich in motivational energies and urges. Without the energy to do things, our sensory information could not produce action. Some motivator must be found and this is the role of our feelings.

Ideally, we will have a measure of control over our motivation, so we are not totally subject to external triggers. How that control is exercised will determine whether we are just a reactionary machine (e.g. impulse eating) or subject entirely to the manipulations of others (e.g. impulse purchasing) or, indeed, totally subject to our own likes and dislikes. As we bring up our children it is important that we help them appreciate that they can choose to do what needs to be done, rather than being the victims of their urges or lack of them.

So far as organisations are concerned, we speak of people being motivated, either extrinsically through carrot or stick or intrinsically because they find it worthwhile or fulfilling. Whichever way you tackle it (and consider carefully, for instance, how it is you motivate yourself) having the 'energy to do' is of critical importance.

“As long as the task involved only mechanical skill, bonuses worked as they would be expected: the higher the pay, the better the performance. Okay? But once the task called for even rudimentary cognitive skill, a larger reward led to poorer performance”.

**Dan Pink**  
*TED Talk 2011*

Drawing from hundreds of studies, Alfie Kohn, in his book, *Punished by Rewards*, demonstrates that people actually do inferior work when they are enticed with money, grades, or other incentives. Programs that use rewards to change people's behaviour are similarly ineffective over the long run.

Perhaps the banking debacle in the UK where fabulously rich traders cheated the financial system to maximise their bonuses is the ultimate evidence of the dysfunction



of extrinsic motivation?

### **Thinking**

Our feelings tend to polarisation: like and dislike; fight and flight. However, a more mature attitude enables us to pause and consider – to find a space between the extremes in which new possibilities can arise. Even animals have a capacity to be in the space between opposites: the young buck that stays on watch while the herd grazes, temporarily suspends fight or flight, modifying his behaviour for the greater good.

Fight or flight is perhaps the most primitive of our responses to sensory stimuli. There is no space or time for thought in extreme life-threatening situations where fast reaction may be our only hope. However, most experience is not of that kind and it is possible for our incoming sensory signals to be processed through our cognitive faculties before we decide when, whether or how to direct our energies into action. This brings us to a third world of perception, which is the domain of our thinking, where we develop mental constructs, store patterns of information and assign significance to external stimuli according to our personally accumulated knowledge of the world.

Sometimes, then, we engage our minds and actually think *before* we act. At its simplest, this is a matter of choosing, but it might also involve a process of analysis and then of planning. More accurately, it involves awareness, focus, observation, assimilation, analysis, hypothesis, synthesis and planning. As the list of sub-processes extends, you can see why we might often be tempted to shy away from it all

and rush into action without much forethought. Indeed there are times when pausing to think is ineffective or even dangerous. Such may be true in an emergency where highly-trained reaction may be necessary for survival.

Nevertheless, we may often be reacting when we should or could be thinking. It is not uncommon, in the domain of busy management, to be good at reacting (fire-fighting) and never to get around to being responsive (fire-*prevention* on the one hand or exploitation of opportunities on the other). When we are able to stack our worlds up rightly, we can be responsive rather than reactive; planning first and then channelling our energies into the most effective action. That way we stand a better chance of achieving outcomes we desire.

### **Seeing**

The first three worlds are our normal comfortable habitat. They are the worlds most of us inhabit most of our lives. However, we occasionally lift the veil and enter a fourth world characterised by the words, 'I see'. By this we imply a 'seeing within' rather than seeing with our eyes. Here we can talk of a world of patterns of ideas in relationship. This differs from the world of thoughts in that it has structure. We have all had the experience of thinking, thinking, thinking - then someone says 'I have an idea' - suddenly light shines on our thoughts. In a flash we have seen what we need to think about - the idea brings insight to our thoughts. This phenomenon is very well documented throughout history - the illuminating flash by which we see.

This is a function, not just the brain, but of the mind – that collection of experience,

knowledge, thought, feeling, relationships, memories and even artefacts that constitutes our life, unique but entangled with everyone we have ever known. Seeing is experienced as a different kind of perception, arising from the right use of our imagination. As in a kaleidoscope, as we assemble information we suddenly 'see' a recognisable set of relationships between component parts. When such a pattern becomes visible to our mind's eye we may shout "Ah, I see" (or, like Archimedes, "Eureka!"). Insight is a flash of recognition that instantly bestows a new degree of freedom. When you 'see', you are less a slave of your environment or your history. Without such seeing, you are likely to stumble blindly around; you are more machine-like, more a mechanism, more prone to become a victim of circumstance. What you 'see' is a pattern of relationships between previously unconnected information. This might also be 'seeing' what someone else is up to, for instance an enemy manoeuvring to outflank you or a trickster setting things up to take your money.

'Seeing' is a step-change to a new level of meaning, where the information you have, suddenly *makes sense* to you. The world itself has not changed, only your understanding has changed – and with that understanding comes freedom to act. Acquiring greater freedom is an unmistakable experience. Our ability to 'see' becomes of critical importance when our environment is in flux. Being able to quickly grasp what is going on may be vital to our survival. The thinking we do after this moment of seeing will be of a totally different kind from the thinking that preceded it.

"I would not give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side"

**Oliver Wendell Holmes**

'Seeing' is powerfully connected with the organisational concern with 'vision'. The word vision is popular in management but often means different things to different people and its potential to align people to a common cause is thereby diminished. Vision is an *imagined* pattern that we can see the possibility of bringing into being. Such vision calls us, so we can work back from the future. It is experienced as a challenge we can choose to embrace. The vision in our minds, once we genuinely buy into it, changes our perceptions – we notice different things, our thinking and motivations change and our actions become more focused.

Vision has something of the all-at-once quality of seeing. In the one case, you are grasping an emergent pattern and in the other you are attempting to create such a pattern. As in a hologram, one may have the whole picture but not necessarily all of the detail. However, with some work on filling in the gaps and solving the problems of execution, it is enough to not only inform plans and strategies, but also to provide the direction and energy to execute them. Vision, seeing a desired future state, is beyond mere thought and hence beyond mere words. Words may help to articulate the vision and thought will be needed in its realisation but we have moved to a higher level of perception.

### **Purposing**

Yet more abstract is what we can call the **Purposive** world - purposive as in 'mission in life' - the life of the project group, the life of the team, even the life of the company or, let's be clear, our own lives as individual human beings. What is it all for?

Purpose addresses the ultimate question, "WHY?" It outlines the overall direction; that which gives **identity** to the group or project. We speak about it as 'a defining

purpose'. It is the source of inspiration that begets ideas. There is a specific kind of perception that is connected with setting or defining our purpose.

In our hierarchy of perceptions, purpose provides intrinsic high-level guidance that determines much about what and how people think and feel. It is the source of meaning. Meaningful work and meaningful living are important to us as human beings. Meaningless work is, literally, de-meaning. Meaningless living is hopeless. Because such guidance is highly effective, thoughts and feelings become aligned, like iron filings in a magnetic field, without need of control and supervision. Conversely, without such guidance, people will often be unwittingly pulling in opposing directions or working against one another. Under such circumstances behaviour drifts and outputs become sub-optimal.

Purpose brings people together as a living whole with a clear identity. It acts as a guiding star that enables us to navigate seas of confusing information, making common sense of whatever befalls us. Common sense is rarely as common as the words suggest. Common sense means sense shared, rather than that such sense is widespread. In either case it is a social construct. Only when sense becomes shared might spreading it broadly add to social well-being. Conversely the common sense of yesterday, that which has become a cultural norm, might inhibit progress towards new meaning.

We talk about the purpose of a meeting or the purpose of a piece of furniture or any other utilitarian object. In this text, though, we are speaking of a shared *sense of purpose* as connecting us with some significant or audacious undertaking – a higher

purpose that gives *meaning* to every thought, every feeling and every action. In such a case, it is something that will take some striving for, may never actually be attained (a direction rather than a goal), and yet will nevertheless give focus to all aspects of life. Once you have a sense of purpose, you are able to choose actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas that serve that purpose and let go of those that do not. Such choosing conserves your energies and focuses them towards your purpose – hence you become powerful.

This is especially so when we need to act in concert with others in common cause. Purpose gives meaning to our existence and a shared identity. Identity can be, quite literally, worth dying for. Purpose is so abstracted that it lifts people above mundane obstacles, enabling lesser differences to be transcended. Acceptance of a purpose is an act of will – a decision to take on a particular cause and meet all the consequences of that decision. It provides a doorway to higher capabilities. So it is that to embrace a purpose provides a means of personal and collective transformation.

How can this be called perception? A choice has been made on some basis and, by committing to a purpose, you change what and how you see. Opportunities that might have passed by, become visible and relevant. What might have gone unnoticed becomes significant. What might have seemed insurmountable becomes irrelevant. You have changed the reality in which you live. You have changed level.

Through embracing with others a purpose beyond my normal ambitions, I acquire the means to change my habits and assumptions, to overcome my limitations and discover new beliefs, new values and new capabilities. Indeed, I have now the means to realise

more of my potential. Apply this to a group and they are well on their way to becoming a team. Sharing a purpose gives them identity and the means to subsume personal agenda for the greater good.

“Until one is committed there is the chance to draw back; always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation) there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too.

All sorts of things occur to help one that would not otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favour all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance which no man would have dreamed would come his way”.

**WH Murray**

*Leader Scottish Mountaineering Club, Himalayan Expedition, 1951*

## **Transpersonal**

Beyond this (and now we are venturing beyond ordinary consciousness and individual identity into realms beyond space and time) we enter a world of patterns of energy and potential. We can directly perceive what David Bohm, the physicist, called the Implicate Order. This is a world in which intuition is our guide, enabling us, as it does, to intuit from a few clues the pattern of emerging events. These perceptions, to which we are not entirely strangers, are often obscured because we do not have a language for them.

Imagine a landscape of shifting possibilities with peaks of potential and barren troughs, made by the interplay of worldly forces – money, markets, power-games, even changing weather patterns. Always in flux, like drifting sands, new opportunities arise and old ones pass, as differing factors ebb and flow. New tensions affect the flux, obstacles are encountered and unexpected abundance (or unexpected shortage) makes new possibilities. It is not without structure or meaning but the shifting patterns are very complex and unpredictable. Nevertheless, whatever our field of specialism, we will have some awareness of these changes impacting upon it. We may see opportunities, though we may not be free to exploit them. Quite often this is only half-perceived, as the whole field may not be apparent from our vantage point. From what is apparent, we may be able to intuit a great deal more. This capability is sometimes called 'gut-feel' or plain intuition. It can be developed.

### **Universal intelligence**

Beyond the world of intuited 'fields of possibility', there is a world so removed from physical existence, we can only describe it as spiritual. Do not confuse spiritual with religious – religion means subscribing to a system of belief or dogma whereas spirit is within all of us. If the use of such a word is uncomfortable to you, please bear with it. You will be less uncomfortable if we speak of competitive spirit, team spirit, entrepreneurial spirit or the spirit of adventure or, simply, of aspiration. It is a human attribute to aspire. Aspiration, we can see from the overall picture of these assembled worlds of perception, is a movement from the physical towards the spiritual. Man stands on the earth but inhabits, as it were, every world between there and heaven – the interface with God.



You may not believe in God and it is not my purpose to persuade you to do so.

However that may be, we all have spirit and can venture into the world of aspirational awareness. With the pressures of daily life we might lose touch with this fact. If so, let us rejoice in its re-discovery. Life will be a dull affair if we are content to be no more than brute animals.

One could say that, when we are fully present and fully alive, we span between these extremes of possibility – from the concrete to the abstract or, in our analogy, from earth to heaven. We can progress in our ability to move from one level of perception to another. We act in the physical world but the wellspring of our actions can be at any level. As we personally develop we have more power to choose where that wellspring will be. This power to move between worlds of perception is our proper state. The different worlds of our perceptions are, indeed, the steps of Jacob's ladder!

"And so mounting as it were by steps, let us get to heaven by a Jacob's ladder. For the ladder seems to me to signify in a riddle by that vision the gradual ascent by means of virtue, by which it is possible for us to ascend from earth to heaven, not using material steps, but improvement and correction of manners."

**Saint John Chrysostom**

William of Wykeham (died 1404) coined the phrase "Manners maketh man". He was implying also that man maketh manners – that decent behaviour is the substance of a decent society. It may not be virtue or manners that enable us to be at home in the higher worlds to which we have rightful access, but some effort is surely needed. If that is what we wish, we may need to let go of our desire to indulge freely in the pleasures of the lower worlds; we may need to free ourselves from automatism and eschew the dulling of our faculties by the mechanisms of modern media; we may need

to value the possibilities that higher worlds offer (whatever we perceive those to be); we may opt for longer-term gains in place of instant gratification; we may think of a wider whole, instead of the small sphere of our personal comfort – and so on.

Through such means, space and time are expanded and the meaning of our living is enriched.

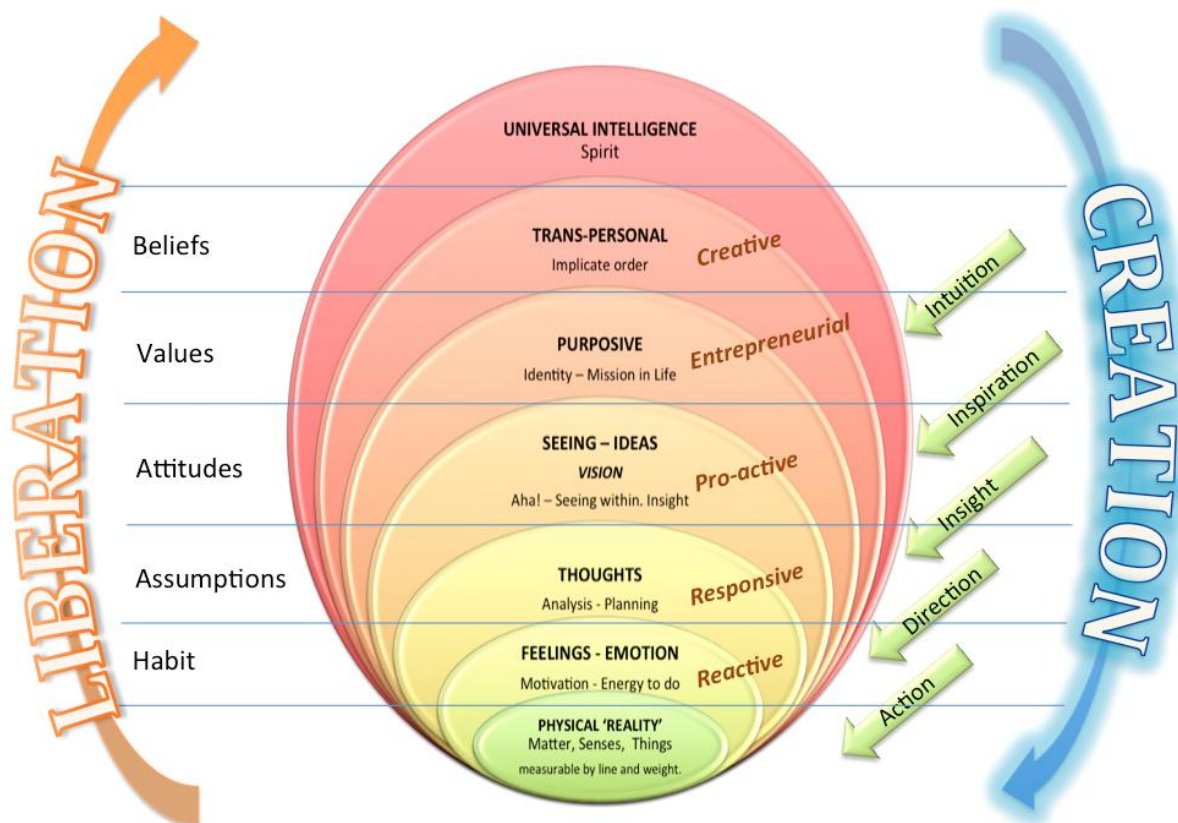
This is clearly relevant to the development of human potential and hence to the idea of meaningful lives and meaningful work. It has a bearing on the nature of leadership and of teamwork. Let us for now just consider that, to be fully human, we might more fully inhabit every world of our perceptions and become capable of moving freely between these worlds as a matter of choice and decision.

### **Living in every world**

What if we can learn to reach out into the worlds and choose to behave in a certain fashion according to our overall grasp of the possibilities 'out there' and what makes sense to us? Whereas we all have the potential to dwell in each of these worlds, by allowing our perceptions to be dulled, we tend to 'gravitate' towards the most concrete. There is a metaphor of someone living in the basement of a mansion, unaware that there are floors above comprising grand and beautifully appointed rooms with awesome views. If the wellspring of our actions was in the most subtle world, our intuition of what was really going on would inspire our ideas and illuminate insightful thoughts so that we could direct our energies into acting in the most intelligent manner. We rarely manage it this way! What obstructs us are the patterns in our mind at every interface.

It is important to recognise that the most concrete world is that with least freedom.  
The more abstract worlds have, as it were, fewer laws to constrain us. Thus although  
our body must obey the laws of physics, our ideas can fly and our spirit can soar.

### The Wellsprings of Action



Although our language, our technology and our culture make it hard to express and explore the finer worlds, we know and name the experiences of communication between them, such as intuition, inspiration, insight, motivation and action, through which we manifest our creativity. We also build in our minds patterns of successful experience that relieve us of the need to "re-invent the wheel".

### **Patterns in the mind**

At the interface with the physical world, habitual behaviours enable us to deal with oft-repeated situations with minimum effort, freeing higher energies for other uses. However, our habits also take our energies down well-worn grooves and make new behaviours all the more difficult. Although many habits can be exceedingly useful to us, if we want to act differently, we need to be able to change our habitual behaviours. It is healthy to exercise this capability, by breaking patterns and exploring alternative behaviours.

At the next level the pattern is more subtle - it is the pattern we call assumptions that constrains our capacity for thinking new thoughts. These are not the assumptions we know we are making but unconscious assumptions, derived from our personal history, that cause us to think the same old thoughts. Assumptions are essential – we cannot address the future without them. For instance, we assume that the sun will rise in the morning, that electricity will flow when we flick the switch, that money will buy goods, that the weather will be more or less appropriate to the season, and so on. However, we should be aware of the need to constantly question our assumptions, especially in times of change or when engaging new ventures.

At the Seeing level, the more subtle pattern of our attitudes shapes how we address situations. A can-do attitude might lead to gains of efficiency and effectiveness but may also prevent us from producing other effects we desire. Other people's attitudes may be visible to us but our own rarely are and can become dangerously beyond question! We need to become aware of how our attitudes are shaped and the degree to which we have freedom to choose attitudes appropriate to the circumstances.

At the Purposive level, the patterning of the mind takes the form of values. We value our values and what we do not value will get little attention. The danger is, that by not giving attention, we miss the signs of threat or opportunity that might save our life or better serve our purpose. Values are largely implicit and unexplored and yet they have a significant effect on how we live our lives. Our values are largely formed through cultural conditioning - instilled into us at an early age by parents, teachers and religion – hence they may not be serving us well as we mature. It is odd to think of someone in mid-life still being governed in many ways by values instilled at a formative age, some of which may not fit thirty years on. Values are by no means fixed but might be overly rigid and thus prevent us from evolving in a way we desire. It takes a conscious effort to question our values and, perhaps, to re-evaluate.

Again more abstract, we come to the patterns of mind called beliefs. Our beliefs are deep seated and we are naturally reluctant to change them. We believe in our beliefs, which seem inseparable from whom we see ourselves to be – and yet those beliefs might, under some circumstances, take us toward disaster or take us away from possibilities that would be to our advantage.

All these patterns of mind on the one hand help us to be effective in the world as we know it but on the other hand inhibit our ability to cope with novel situations. If we are not able to let them go, we will not develop. In extreme cases such inability can lead to our demise.

### **Mindset and paradigms**

We see this patterning acting in different ways, ever more subtle and difficult to change. It is part of the efficiency of our minds that we develop what is called mind-set. Mind-set is the whole subtle, unconscious patterning of our interpretation of phenomena that works well for known situations. Its effect is that our mind does not need to constantly interpret what is going on because it 'knows'. This is a great gain as long as the patterning that the mind knows corresponds to the circumstances.

"It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble.  
It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."

**Mark Twain**

For example, in a letter to the Financial Times, one Michael Skapinker said, '*Not only do many chief executives ignore any evidence that they may be wrong, they also continue in their behaviour long after it has become obvious that it is getting them nowhere*'.

It may be easy to see this phenomenon in other people but it affects us all. In our formative years we develop our mental models, influenced by those around us, building our maps of how the world works. All new experience is then added to those mental maps until, as we reach adulthood, and especially as we achieve a position of some importance, they seem robust and more or less complete. Then, as life continues, we demand explanations – rubrics for relating new experience to our established maps. Anything that cannot be so explained is regarded as somehow beyond the pale. We readily deny evidence that lies outside our maps. – 'no scientific justification' is a term often heard to dismiss phenomena that simply do not fit.

However, it is a dangerous statement because it might be that science has not yet asked the right questions or given attention to gathering the data. Science only addresses questions which the scientific method can usefully investigate and leaves most observable phenomena unexplainable. As with science, so much more so with our everyday processes of sense-making.

The process of paradigm construction has two components – 1) Make the mental map and – 2) Map new experience onto the map. Once our map achieves a sufficient degree of complexity to deal adequately with our day-to-day experience, we tend to abandon exploratory map-making in favour of concretising our map. To break free, we have to do something different and altogether more challenging and disturbing.

These principles are demonstrated in the extreme by fundamentalists and bigots in all societies – but also to some extent by society's power-possessing beings themselves, as it is they who have most to lose if the framework of those societies is shown to be built on dubious foundations, as is parodied in the story of the emperor's clothes. Conversely, those who preach the new doctrine while the old one reigns will be seen as heretical or insane. Cultures are robust because the patterns that support a particular world-view are embedded deeply and beyond the control of any person or faction.

### **The map is not the territory**

At some point we may accept Alfred Korzybski's dictum that "the map is not the territory" – a theme developed by Bateson. As we enter new territory, much of the map has to be scrapped and a new one built in its place. However, we will have

invested much of our life in building the mental map that has served us thus far, and scrapping a map can be a frightening affair. That is why, for some people, deep personal crisis or acts of war are needed for them to be able to embrace change. A few are constantly re-mapping and, ever youthful, re-inventing themselves. Many of us cannot meet such a challenge and will cling to our old dysfunctional map until death doth us part. (Varney letter to Financial Times, December 2002)

What benefits do people get if they break through the barriers and if they learn to listen to their inner self? This is the dimension of being and becoming: of releasing potential - of aspiration and increasing freedom. Freedom from the tyranny within or, in other words, liberation. Being is that quality that enables someone to hold things together – to be the rock in a stormy sea - the still point in a changing world.

### **Creating**

There is no actual barrier to higher perceptions other than those we make ourselves or allow others to impose upon us. Breaking free from these patterns enables us to raise the wellspring of our actions and to open ourselves to a flow of creativity through our intuition, inspiration, and insight that will focus our energies in effective action.

What kind of perception gives us access to a higher world or a change of level? On the right side of our diagram we have words describing how one world flows into the next, if the barriers are permeable. The flow from more subtle worlds into the more concrete is what we call creativity. In this sense, then, creativity is a matter of receptivity – of being an open conduit for that flow.



If our senses stimulate action directly, as in fight or flight, there is no involvement of our thinking – we simply react. We train people to react swiftly without need of thought so that they will be safe in the event of a calamity, such as a fire in the workplace or the crash-landing of an aircraft. Trained responses are very important.

However, in other cases we want people to use their cognitive skills to make the most of their specific situation. They need to suspend reaction in order to take in information and think through the implications before directing energy into action. This applies, for instance, to empowered and engaged employees having the freedom to please customers. They will be better able to do so if their thoughts are inspired by a shared vision of what success looks like. Shared vision will help them avoid dissipating energy or duplicating effort by pulling in different directions. Inspiration will help them plan creatively and grasp opportunities because they are able to recognise them.

Such inspiration will be fed by insights - perceptions that derive from the common purpose. Insights are likely to be less frequent for those without aspiration because insight is the coming into perspective of connections between influencing factors – the 'aha!' moment when the bits fit and new meaning is made.

Beyond insight is receptivity to intuition. Intuition can enable someone to grasp the overall pattern of events in spite of missing pieces. Beyond that, in turn, is the revelation of higher order meaning out of which such patterns emerge. The whole creative cascade of perceptions, from revelation through to effective action is perhaps the right state for mankind. However, we often confuse ourselves by acting

mechanically or rushing into action on the basis of half-truths or acting not in accord with one another. Life usually appears easier if you just follow rules. Higher perceptions tend to be harder to bear, as each level brings a higher degree of freedom and hence of personal responsibility for whatever consequences arise. Our societies have tended to demand compliance and consequently diminished personal responsibility – it is a poor model.

### **The wellsprings of our actions**

Often we are merely a reactionary blob – the wellsprings of our actions are simply sensory responses or, at best, our emotions are triggered so that we mindlessly respond – higher intelligence does not come into play. Sometimes we think before we act – but not as often as we would like to believe. Occasionally our thoughts and plans are illuminated by insightful thoughts that direct our energies into effective action. The quality of thought that is informed by insight is quite different from that which lacks it.

If we have clarity about our purpose and identity, then we are attuned for inspiration and the clarity of our inner seeing will bring insight to our thinking. Insofar as we have an awareness of shifting patterns in our field of endeavour, we will have intuitions of the implicate order that, through inspiration and insight, ultimately influence the effectiveness of our actions. Sometimes we are able to transcend even that, so that we lose our self entirely in the service of a greater whole as, for instance, in acts of extraordinary courage in battle, acts of extraordinary creativity in art or like a Samurai warrior or a Zen archer, we can be wholly in command of our self and at

one with our action. The higher the wellsprings of our actions the more intelligent we are being.

### **Maturity**

The capacity to be able to choose the wellspring of your actions arises from maturity.

Maturity is not a matter of age but is a quality of being. One can be old and immature. Maturing may take place slowly over a lifetime or can sometimes be accelerated by dramatic or even traumatic experiences. One effect of maturity is an increasing freedom to choose whether to react or to think; to be proactive or creative; to be able to rise above a situation; to bear with contradictions; to be able to transform a situation into an opportunity for the development of others; and so on.

Maturity is not a permanent state. It can also be reversed by indulgence, laziness, carelessness and corruption. Then we need a shock that awakens us – a nudge of leadership from someone.

### **Development**

The word development as used in management, education and human resources, usually refers to career progression, along with acquisition of skills and knowledge. Here we are interested in development as personal transformation – of aspiring to be all we can be. In biological terms, such personal development is the purpose of our evolution as living wholes. (Maturana and Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge*)

Development is systemic change towards a greater degree of awareness, consciousness and maturity – a more whole or complete state that is also an

awakening of the spirit, with more freedom from the attachments of the more concrete worlds. From an everyday perspective, it would appear that physical reality has more substance than the spirit world, but this is an inversion. We are aspirational beings and have the ability to fully exist in every one of these worlds. When we awaken to this fact we develop 'new organs of perception' and new powers of action.

### **Living systems**

In organisational terms, we can organise in a way that utilises the greater freedom of higher levels of perception to serve the corporate purpose. This, I suggest, is the *change of level* people seek but, without a shared framework, change of level is somewhat meaningless and it is difficult to make progress. Just as, individually, we can achieve a change of perception and a different degree of freedom to creatively respond to changes around us, so our organisations can similarly develop as living organisms. If we have created our organisations as machines, this kind of development will be inaccessible to us. They must become self-organising living systems or we are condemned to put on the pressure so work people ever harder – a self-limiting strategy. There comes a point where more of the same no longer works. If we genuinely seek a change of level we will need to attend to the nature of our way of organising and make of it a living organism.

### **Leadership**

20th century ideas of leadership suited 20th century organisations but do not meet modern and emerging needs. Currently many people still think of leadership as being vested in great leaders, even though we rarely see this succeed. Unfortunately great leaders do not emerge when we want them. Moreover people who seem promising

often become self-serving and leave the scene with un-earned rewards. We waste energy in seeking great leaders, in training people in this kind of leadership and following lesser leaders who we then pillory for their failings.

If leadership is not what it used to be, what is it becoming? The idea of 'Great Leader' fits with the mechanistic model of organisation. In a control and command hierarchy, it is assumed that leadership stems from the most powerful person and cascades down to touch everyone.

In an organic model, leadership is distributed. Everyone has responsibility for it. We could think of it as '360 degree' leadership. We have leadership responsibility to those who report to us, to our peers and, perhaps surprisingly, for those with a broader remit than our own and more senior in our organisation. Leadership, however, is not a personal role. The role of leadership is to realise potential; to bring out the best in people; to transform individuals, teams and organisations. Leadership is something everyone practises willy-nilly whether for good or ill. We practise leadership whenever we act in a way that influences another. Systemic leadership is the whole pattern and flow of energy within an organisation or community, composed of countless leadership acts that aim to serve the common purpose.

In an organic organisation leadership sustains the systemic flow that changes level, up and down Jacob's ladder, helping the development of new patterns in the mind and helping the creative receptivity of intuition, inspiration and insight. As people become more effective they also grow in maturity; the two processes are intimately connected.

Leadership explores new meaning and new possibilities, enabling people to enter

unknown territory. As it is a systemic flow, it is itself sustained by everyone's contributions as they enter and leave the flow; the push and pull of countless acts of leadership by which people help one another raise their game. People step into and out of the flow according to the weighting of their relationship with those around them. The one who sees at any moment leads those who do not.

Regardless of who provides it, leadership lifts! Leadership is value-raising activity. Leadership enhances people's belief in what they are capable of and helps them achieve it. So it is that, as people go about their everyday living and their everyday work, lifting and learning, they facilitate the flow between earth and heaven via the steps of Jacob's ladder.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

John Varney's early career in architecture culminated in his own small practice in Surrey. As an alpinist, his personal leadership developed through the introduction of many novices to the mountains. Influenced by the philosopher, J.G. Bennett, and inspired by the creativity of the Bauhaus, he decided to pursue his vision of developing human potential through experiential learning. He set up High Trenhouse as a learning project in 1976 and in 1989 established The Centre for Management Creativity, which has grown into a multi-faceted company with a reputation for getting results.

John is coach, consultant and facilitator to senior managers and management teams of many organisations, from multi-national corporations to community groups. A popular guest speaker on change and learning, he is regarded as a leader in the field of creativity and innovation.

John's work consists primarily in developing attitudes and beliefs, changing relationships and behaviours in order to define and achieve organisational goals. It embraces inter-company collaboration, strategy innovation, teamwork, authentic leadership, thinking methodology and creativity through team and personal coaching. He is pioneering the application of visual thinking methods to enhance education and organisational effectiveness.

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Based in the UK, the Centre for Management Creativity (CMC) provides facilitation, methods, products and places for inspiring vision, developing strategy and helping people adopt a creative approach to challenge and change.

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