# Creating Order and Meaning During Organizational Chaos

The Fall & Rise of the Learning Organization
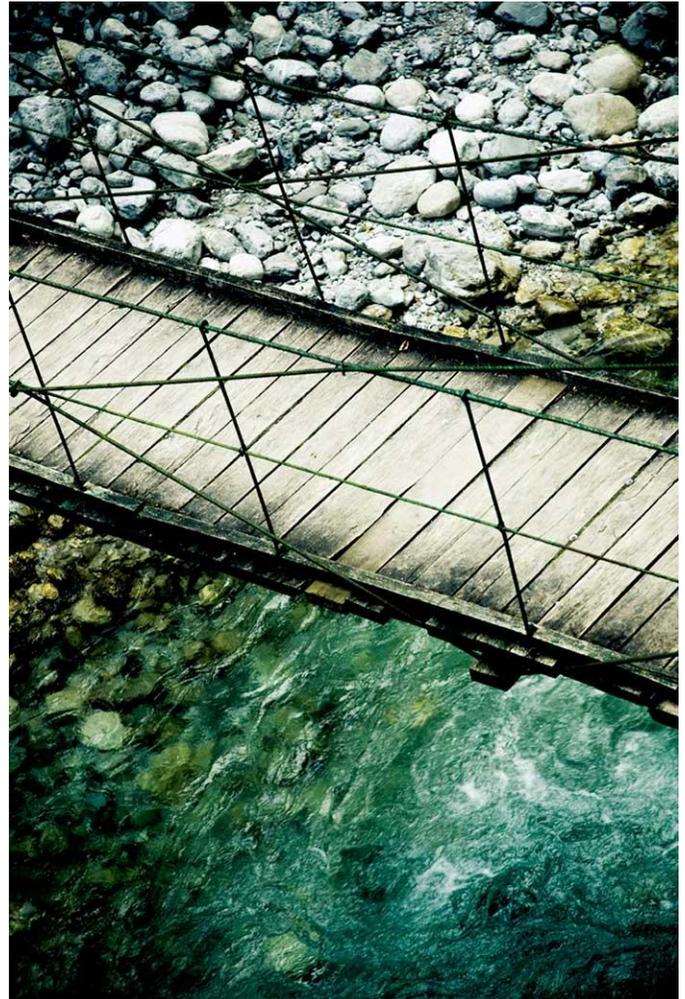
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Meaning is not something you stumble across, like the answer to a riddle or the prize in a treasure hunt. Meaning is something you build into your life.

You build it out of your own past, out of your affections and loyalties, out of the experience of humankind as it is passed on to you, out of your own talent and understanding, out of the things you believe in, out of the things and people you love, out of the values for which you are willing to sacrifice something.

The ingredients are there. You are the only one who can put them together into that unique pattern that will be your life. Let it be a life that has dignity and meaning for you. If it does, then the particular balance of success or failure is of less account.

John W. Gardner

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Introduction

The Learning Organization.

Most of us have become well acquainted with this much used (and misused) expression. MIT senior lecturer and organizational consultant Peter Senge gave prominence to this term 20 years ago in his best-selling book [The Fifth Discipline](). Many organizations adopt such labels as the Learning Organization, Lifelong Learning and Continuous Learning. Are they living up to their claims? Frequently, they're approaching learning from the traditional sense - one that is narrow in context. To be a lifelong learner requires one to transcend to a new level, and in which the organization evolves steadily, shedding structures, processes, and barriers that inhibit the growth of a true learning culture.

Perhaps a more apt expression is the *Thinking Organization*. The ability to "think" by people at all levels of the organization is essential to its progressive evolution. Without it, an organization's intellectual development will be stunted, resulting in an inability to both anticipate and respond to new challenges.

There has never been a greater need for the emergence of a learning (or thinking) culture in organizations, whether in the private or public sectors. The increasing rapidity of change, with the growing demands on management and

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>
> *Margaret Wheatley*

staff to perform at higher levels with diminishing resources, demands that business be conducted differently. Competition over the past decade from emerging economies has accelerated, placing a greater premium on creativity and innovation.

The purpose of this e-book, therefore, is to stimulate your thinking on continuous learning in the context of organizational turbulence. It draws on the ideas of such notable writers as Margaret Wheatley, Peter Block, Angeles Arrien and Peter Senge. These writers focus on the deeper issues affecting organizations. They are not

prescriptive like many writers. Instead, what they offer is a foundation from which an organization can grow and develop.

Finally, this e-book will have earned its value if it helps to propel you, the reader, forward through reflections on learning experiences in both your personal and professional lives. If you are in a leadership position, it provides an opportunity for self-examination of your role as champion and advocate for your followers. After all, leaders must not only question existing work processes and explore new concepts, they must encourage and expect that their staff do so as well.

> *Rigid identities give rise to rigid organizations.*
> *Margaret Wheatley*

Beyond Order and Control

Natural Systems

We've only just entered the 21st Century; 89 years remain. We talk of the need to meet new challenges. However, North American organizations are still basically rooted to the models that emerged from the Industrial Revolution. We still want order, control, structure, roles, responsibilities, and job descriptions. We strive, however valiantly, to resist the tidal wave of change that's already upon us. Margaret Wheatley believes that we must look at the natural world and how it is able to successfully make order out of chaos. Until we unhook ourselves from this obsession for control and order, organizations will continue to experience increasing stresses and strains.

Natural systems offer us many insights into how organizations function. Just as nature is complex and diverse, so too are organizations. We need to find models for organizations that allow for flexibility and the capacity for change.

> *One's attitude towards a situation is the one thing that cannot be taken away.*

Wheatley sees it this way: "Our first task is to see the world differently. We need to observe processes that we either ignored or could not see. Self-organization is not a startling new feature of the world. It is the way the world has created itself for billions of years. In all of human activity, self-organization is how we begin. It is what we do until we interfere with the process and try to control one another."

Accepting that the old ways no longer work and that organizations must jettison this unwanted baggage will enable them to establish new ways of doing work and achieving results. But these processes will be fluid and evolve continually, not just responding to new external stimuli and challenges, but actually anticipating them.

How will this occur and where does leadership fit in? Wheatley refers to the self-organizing system and the key role that leaders must play in allowing their organizations to evolve. The role of the leader is to provide clarity to the organization's purpose and direction.

The most difficult challenge leaders will face is learning to place their trust in this system.

Vision and Trust

When people are clear on the organization's purpose (mission), its direction, and where they fit, they are then capable of achieving incredible results. Unleashing their focused creativity and energy will virtually assure this. As Wheatley states: *"What leaders are called upon to do in a chaotic world is to shape their organizations through concepts, not through elaborate rules or structures."* Instead of concentrating on the components of the organization, leaders need to pause and stand back to identify patterns that emerge. They must then direct their efforts to being catalysts in helping renew their organizations.

> *Vision emerges from the interactions and the hearts of those working in an organization.*

Leaders need vision. That is well established. But so, too, do employees. Vision is like an invisible field within an organization. It permeates the organization and can be felt by outsiders when they enter. A corporate vision is the composite of the personal visions of its people. It is not a future, external view, but rather it is intrinsic to the people that make up an organization. Vision emerges from the interactions and the hearts of those working in an organization. It enables people to renew and reinvent their workplace. And the basis for renewing an organization is the free flow of information. Information is the lifeblood of an organization and the source of all the energy that leads to renewal and reorganization. Stopping the flow of information is to prevent the organization from reinventing itself.

The learning organization of the future is one based on relationships and a higher level of consciousness. Relationships give us meaning, unleashing our potential. They form the basis of teams.

In an environment based on relationships, people are enabled to think critically. They have the freedom to explore and to experiment and to take risks. They feel secure to do this without fear of retribution. Leaders trust their people, knowing that they are working in the best interests of the organization. This is in stark contrast to organizations today where people are forced into conforming and discouraged from thinking critically. The consequence has been the failure of organizations to develop real solutions to problems. As author Philip Crosby (*The Absolutes of Leadership*) states: "*The business desert is layered with the bones of those who felt they understood completely and stopped learning.*"

Organizational Glue

Transcending to the learning organization of the future will not be easy. To trust their people and to share power, leaders must first be secure with themselves. Yielding control and sharing power is the biggest challenge many managers will face. However, it is an integral part of creating what has been referred to as a *boundaryless* organization. Tearing down the barriers that prevent the free flow of information - and people from achieving high performance - will yield an organization that is capable of quickly changing its form. To use a Star Trek term, organizations will become *Shapeshifters*.

> *An essential component of building a learning culture is senior leaders living out their commitments to learning.*

Because people in a true learning organization are clear on their own purposes in life and that of their organization, they are able to meet head on any crises arising from chaos. They emerge as stronger individuals, prepared to meet the next change. In essence, what is being said here is the emergence of the *self-reliant worker*, in which the individual assumes responsibility for their personal and career development.

What is being discussed here is the burial of the old psychological contract, in which the employee's self-worth was tied to the organization. The new contract is very different. Employees are now expected to become increasingly independent, taking an active part in their own growth and development. The basis of this is to learn continually.

David Noer (author of [Breaking Free](#)) tells the story of the chief financial officer of a high tech company who broke down in tears during a senior management workshop on change management. Realizing the profound changes his organization had gone through and the many more changes (including additional layoffs) to come, he wailed about where is the "glue" to hold the organization together?

Noer sees this "glue" as being participation, learning, and the human spirit. But to get at this new glue, people must first tear themselves away from the old glue of dependency and top down control. Attempting to hold an organization together using the old glue won't work. The new glue must be *internalized*. It will produce the individual and organizational learning needed by organizations to survive.

Interdependent Learning

One way to see this is as *mutual interdependence*. The organization provides a learning experience to the employee, who adds this to his or her repertoire of skills. The organization gets back in return value-added work and a commitment from the employee. A *symbiotic relationship* has been created. To achieve this requires both sides - management and staff - to drop the baggage of old beliefs and to look at work in a new light. As Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, put it, "*The people who get into trouble in our company are those who carry around the anchor of the past.*"

The *learning employee* is the person who demonstrates the following traits needed to build a learning culture:

> optimistic,

> constructive,

> can-do attitude,

> participates actively,

> takes action and risks,

> shows perspective,

> good sense of humour,

> loves to learn,

> breaks down barriers,

> very adaptable.

An essential component of building a learning culture is senior leaders living out their commitments to learning. One highly effective way to do this is through mentorship.

Leaders as Mentors

Leaders must assume the role of mentors to help their organizations develop cultures that value experimentation over procedure, creativity over compliance, and learning from mistakes over sticking with what has worked in the past. Chip Bell, the author of *Managers as Mentors,* offers three ways to help leaders become more effective mentors.

Humility: Leaders must show that they, too, are people, with emotions and frustrations. They need to put aside the power of their positions and to become active learners themselves. They must focus on continuous improvement, not on control.

Curiosity: Strong mentors seek to explore the unknown, listening carefully to those who know more than they. Openness to new ideas and concepts is displayed, and they avoid power symbols such as imposing desks that act as barriers. They are empathetic, inquisitive, optimistic, and courageous.

Generosity: Leaders who are good mentors offer advice but first ask permission and explain the purpose (eg, "How about we explore this aspect of the project."). They also use "I" statements instead of saying "You should do..."

Bell states that mentoring is an honour. "With the exception of love, there is no greater gift than the gift of learning and continuous growth. When mentoring occurs between an executive and an associate, it must be practiced as a partnership. And, in the whitewater entrepreneurial world, great mentoring may be the factor that keeps the organization afloat."

> *You lead people best when you develop a vision and then move from vision to action by using a proven strategy process.*
>
> *Burt Nanus*

Achieving Meaning During Chaos

Searching for Meaning

Scientists see chaos as essential for organisms to renew and revitalize themselves. The same is true of organizations. When people go through a very difficult period, they emerge stronger and with a greater sense of purpose. Wheatley believes that organizations must learn to work with chaos because it is a powerful creative force, one that produces new levels of understanding and growth of people.

Many people experience great difficulty in coping with the uncertainties of rapid organizational change. They feel lost and adrift as their coworkers leave the organization, as technology exerts its tremendous impact on how work is done, and as their own futures are cast in doubt. But why is it that some people are able to create meaning in their work during organizational chaos while others flounder?

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl wrote that meaning saved many lives in the concentration camps during World War Two. People can withstand tremendous hardships if they search for meaning. One's attitude towards a situation is the one thing that cannot be taken away. Here are excerpts from Frankl's book, which illustrate the phases the prisoners went though.

"The thought of suicide was entertained by nearly everyone, if only for a brief time. It was born of the hopelessness of the situation, the constant danger of death looming over us daily and hourly, and the closeness of the deaths suffered by many of the others. From personal convictions which will be mentioned later, I made myself a firm promise, on my first evening in camp, that I would not "run into the wire." This was a phrase used in camp to describe the most popular method of suicide – touching the electrically charged barbed-wire fence. There was little point in committing suicide,

since, for the average inmate, life expectation, calculating objectively and counting all likely chances, was very poor. ...The prisoner of Auschwitz, in the first phase of shock, did not fear death. Even the gas chambers lost their horrors for him after the first few days − after all, they spared him the act of committing suicide....

Apathy, the blunting of emotions and the feeling that one could not care anymore, were the symptoms arising during the second stage of the prisoner's psychological reactions, and which eventually made him insensitive to daily and hourly beatings. By means of this insensibility the prisoner soon surrounded himself with a very necessary protective shell."

As time progressed in the concentration camp, Frankl's insights grew:

"The prisoner who had lost his faith in the future − his future − was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay. ...He simply gave up. There he remained, lying in his own excreta, and nothing bothered him anymore."

From his experiences in a concentration camp, Frankl came to realize that the individual does have a choice of action, even when faced with what appears to be overwhelming odds. As he states: "*Man **can** preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.*"

Beyond the Superficial

Wheatley discovered this phenomenon herself during her work with organizations that were experiencing massive change. Some employees realized that the only way they could continue to exist in such an environment was to seek out personal meaning in their work. In other organizations, Wheatley found that the senior leaders went to great lengths to explain to employees the difficulties ahead and why they were occurring. Being

> *Too many organizations ask us to engage in hollow work.*
>
> *Margaret Wheatley*

honest and open with these employees helped them through these difficult periods. She explains meaning as being "*a point of reference.*" She continues: "*As long as we keep purpose in focus in both our organizational and private lives, we are able to wander through the realms of chaos, make decisions about what actions will be consistent without purpose, and emerge with a discernible pattern or shape to our lives.*"

People quickly see through superficial attempts by management to get employees on side. They realize at the start or soon afterwards that the purpose is self-centered. When people resist or display apathy, their eyebrows rise. This shouldn't come as a surprise, and as Wheatley asserts: "*Too many organizations ask us to engage in hollow work, to be enthusiastic about small-minded visions, to commit ourselves to selfish purposes, to engage our energy in competitive drives.*"

Bolman and Deal talk about the need to recapture the sprit. As individuals, "...we need to relearn how to lead with soul. How to breathe new zest and buoyancy into life. How to reinvigorate the family as a sanctuary where people can grow, develop, and find love. How to reinfuse the workplace with vigor and élan. Leading with soul returns us to ancient spiritual basics – reclaiming the enduring capacity that gives our lives passion and purpose."

You create a culture of contribution when you seek to meet both the mission of the organization and the needs of the people.

James R. Fisher Jr.

Laying a Foundation for the Learning Organization

The Thinking Employee

The traditional approach to training is failing to meet the needs of organizations as they prepare to deal with the challenges of the 21st Century. Senior leaders must not believe that employees will be able to think and behave differently in a learning organization if they are not properly prepared. It is one thing for leaders to espouse that their organizations are "learning organizations." It is quite another when one looks deeper at these organizations to discover that their approaches are essentially facades for continuous learning.

Substantial effort and money has been devoted to training people in behaviors under such subjects as leadership, diversity and communication. However, as Wheatley points out these behaviors are not lists of rules or techniques. Rather, they emerge from understandings (often implicit) of how people will interact. *"We can't train people to be open, or fair, or responsible if the real agreement is that we must succeed at all costs, or that we have no choice but to keep laying people off."*

These organizations are undermining their long-term existences by not establishing the foundations from which learning cultures will flourish. For employees - managers and staff - to engage in continuous learning one must first eliminate the notion that the training branch (and more broadly the human resources department) "owns" learning. Learning belongs to everyone, permeating the organization from the frontline clerk to the CEO. It is everyone's responsibility. It is a collaborative effort that produces synergies as people learn from one another, and as enthusiasm for learning infects the organization.

The beauty of this is that it is "real-time" learning. It is not a group of people stuck in a classroom for several days, growing increasingly numb, retaining less and less of the information received. Because true learning is a collaborative effort, the notion of just-in-time learning, based on the traditional training approach, becomes largely redundant.

Another way of looking at a new approach to learning is what Peter Senge calls Systems Thinking. This involves seeing the organization, as a whole, encompassing its interdependent parts. Systems Thinking requires a radical departure from the traditional view of learning, from silos and turfs to processes and interdependency. Senge explains learning this way: "*Learning in organizations means the continuous testing of experience, and the transformation of that experience into knowledge – accessible to the whole organization, and relevant to its core purpose.*"

Beyond Bureaucracy

To make the shift from bureaucracy to organizational intelligence entails moving away from relationships of dominance and submission within the organizational command structure to horizontal peer relationships based on networks of voluntary cooperation.
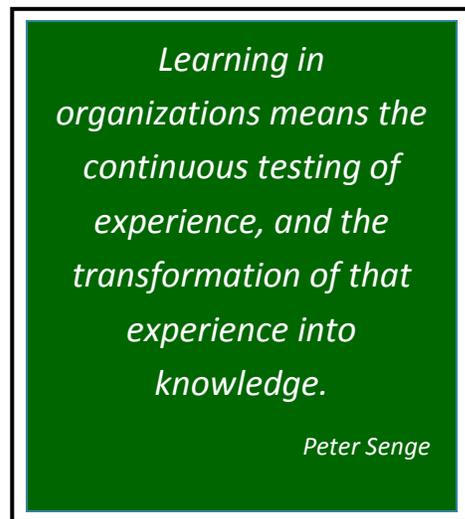
> *Learning in organizations means the continuous testing of experience, and the transformation of that experience into knowledge.*
>
> *Peter Senge*

These networks, consisting of people, form the organization's brain. What these networks form, in effect, is a *community of knowledge.*

Through his research, Peter Senge developed a model of how a *learning community* becomes established. It is a complex system comprising five parts: research, practice, capacity building, communications, and governance. Research involves the disciplined approach to discovery and understanding, with a commitment to share what one learns. Practice occurs when people attempt to make something practical happen. "*A learning community,*" Senge states, "*is a group of people who embrace the world of research and the world of practice. They are committed to generating practical, tangible results, and to building knowledge about how it is done.*"

Many organizations, however, have failed at building learning communities. Senge observes that this is not surprising when one considers the high degree of vulnerability that comes with people clarifying their thinking, opening up, and displaying their

assumptions and beliefs. This is in contradiction to the command and control approach most organizations still follow. However, to bring about significant change and to move an organization towards creating a learning culture requires that it be done in the context of a community.

The way to initiate learning is to make it part of working. The learning process is judged, therefore, by the results people accomplish. As Senge states: "*The learning that really matters in an organization is when a group of people, who collectively have the power to take action, collectively are learning.*"

Authority vs. Engagement

To create a learning organization, the view prevails that senior management must give the signal or its nod of approval. Peter Block notes that it was radical for one to think that employees could create an organization of their choice - that was the job of senior management. However, Block observed that while an organization's top leaders do indeed have a very strong influence, it's instructive to remember that in practice it is the "inmates who are running the prison."

There is no absolute authority in an organization. Employees may want to believe that the "boss" is in control, but this is more fantasy than fact. For change to occur and take hold throughout an organization, people must be willing to accept it. It's much easier for senior management to tighten up, downsize, and restructure than it is to invoke greater openness, trust, participation and collaboration. Extending this to the concept of the learning organization entails the same approach: employees must assume responsibility for making it happen - call it leading from middle.

Because organizations still rely on the belief that employees must show self-control and yield to authority, the view prevails of "who cares" when they are asked about how they "feel" about an issue. Leaders look for ways to motivate employees and to generate energy. But by denying their self-expression and requiring them to show self-control, leaders extinguish the flames of energy and motivation.

> *The process of organizational politics as we know it works against people taking responsibility.*
>
> *Peter Block*

Block is blunt when he states how organizations dampen the spirit of their employees: "…the process of organizational politics as we know it works against people taking responsibility. …Manipulation is so ingrained in our way of doing business that we often do not recognize it."

Embedding Trust

Wheatley speaks of *systems of trust*, in which people are encouraged to build the relationships they need to conduct their work. Trust opens up the organization, including those who were previously excluded. What is key to remember is that structures and behaviors emerge from relationships. An organization is built on relationships, not on initiatives and pronouncements dropped from on high.

An organization that wishes to begin building a dynamic learning culture needs to first do an objective and open assessment of its climate and culture - call it facing the music. This assessment actually consists of two parts: a corporate assessment (finding out what everyone is thinking collectively) and individual assessments (determining what are the specific concerns of people). These assessments are tantamount to getting the cards on the table. The organization must know where it is at, with respect to its climate and culture, and where it wants to go if it is to grow and prosper. (See Appendix for a learning organization assessment)

> *People refuse to be innovative because they fear reprisal from taking risks and making mistakes. The fear of accountability goes hand-in-hand with the fear of reprisals.*
>
> *Peter Kline & Bernard Saunders*

Peter Kline and Bernard Saunders (*[Ten Steps to a Learning Organization](#)*) have found through their work that the primary cause for confusion and lack of commitment in organizations is *fear*. Fear is so endemic to many organizations that it becomes part of their climate. People refuse to be innovative because they fear reprisal from taking risks and making mistakes. The fear of accountability goes hand-in-hand with the fear of reprisals. People go to work each day with a knot in their stomachs, uncertain what the day will bring. This is the first thing that management must determine: is their fear in the organization and to what extent does it exist?

The late W. Edwards Demmings, the founder of the quality movement, said: *"The first principle is to drive out fear."* When fear takes control of people they perform at much

lower levels. Their thinking, judgement, and decision-making are poor, and they are unable to look ahead to where the organization should be going.

Unfortunately, fear is still seen as the primary motivator for change – people will only change when they are scared. Wheatley explains it this way: "*We bully one another into new behaviors by telling terrifying tales of the forces that threaten us. As a species, we continue to terrorize ourselves by these thoughts of evolution, driving us towards the future by fears of being annihilated. We view life's very nature, its great creative motions, as the enemy.*"

So where does it start? For an organization to begin the journey to becoming a learning organization, everyone must be willing to change. And it is especially important that senior and middle management lead the way. However, this should not be confused with management directing employees how to make change. Rather, the role of management is to listen, coach, and teach. And above all, its role is to believe in the organization's people and to trust them.

Stewardship

To use a term from Peter Block, managers and staff must follow the concept of *stewardship*. Each and every one of us must learn to put self-interest aside and put service to the organization first. Only by doing this will an organization evolve to a higher level of learning and engagement.

To serve an organization well, Block puts forth five pursuits people must follow. He refers to this as *enlightened self-interest*.

Meaning: People engage in activities that have personal meaning and that are needed by the organization. Substance takes precedence over form.

Contribution and Service: People want to contribute positively to the organization. Specifically, they want their efforts to connect to the organization's purpose.

Integrity: People at all levels of the organization must be able to express their views and what they observe taking place. Feeling "safe" to speak out is essential to a learning organization. People must be able to admit their mistakes. They must believe that the "authentic act" is always in the best interest of the organization.

Positive Impact on Others' Lives: People spend a large percentage of their waking lives at work. Developing close relationships with co-workers, in which their growth and development is cared about, makes sense to most people. Yet the opposite is true to a large extent. For example, the fear a manager may have of laying off a subordinate one day may inhibit him or her from establishing strong relationships with staff. This also occurs with co-workers, especially during a period of downsizing. The consequence is an atmosphere that lacks honesty and openness, one consisting of shallow and brittle relationships. How can teamwork exist, let alone prosper, in such an environment? Strong teamwork requires a high degree of interdependency and close relationships.

Mastery: This involves people learning as much as they can about their work. People take pride and satisfaction in their work when performing at high levels. Learning and performance are intertwined.

The strength of following these five pursuits is that it does not require the approval of senior management. Each of us needs to set an example to our peers. Each of us needs to set upon a journey of self-discovery. Wheatley observes that the human species has a high capacity for reflection and learning. This capacity is a major contribution to all life. Moreover, it is not just for survival but also a *...quality of mind that we contribute to life.*

> *You will accelerate your personal learning and exponentially increase corporate learning when you teach what you learn to others.*
>
> *Stephen R. Covey*

Becoming a Whole Learner

The Four-Fold Way

To become a whole learner requires one to know oneself thoroughly - strengths, weaknesses, desires, needs and values. Unless each of us takes the time to do self-evaluation, we will achieve only limited success in our pursuit for growth and development. Lifelong learning requires each of us to look inside and strive for balance in how we approach life - whether it is at the office or at home.

Anthropologist and organizational consultant Angeles Arrien speaks of the need for each of us to seek balance in four areas, or what she calls *archetypes*: *Warrior*, *Healer*, *Visionary*, and *Teacher*. Each of these archetypes exists within each of us, waiting to be expressed through our daily actions. People gravitate, however, to one type. But to be a whole person and a whole learner requires each of us to achieve balance between these four archetypes. Arrien calls it walking *The Four-Fold Way*. A brief summary of each of the four archetypes follows.

The Warrior

The *Warrior* is the archetype of leadership. To be an effective leader in today's rapidly changing society and economy requires developing the inner *Warrior*. This means showing honor and respect for people, using effective communication, setting limits and boundaries, and not abusing power.

Showing honor and respect is the most important part of the *Warrior*. To be an effective leader requires a deep understanding of oneself - both strengths and weaknesses. It also means having an appreciation of peoples' diversity and helping them grow through a variety of tasks and assignments. The role of the *Warrior* is to be

visible and to inspire others by setting an example. *Power of presence* involves bringing forth the four intelligences: mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical.

The Healer

The *Healer* requires that each of us pay attention to what has heart and meaning. Healers, regardless of tradition, are skilled in the art of acknowledgement.

A fundamental part of healing is the principle of *reciprocity* - the ability to give and receive equally, and the ability to connect. For people to maintain their health and well-being, they must sustain the balance between giving and receiving. And when imbalance occurs between the two they must be able to recognize this and act to correct it.
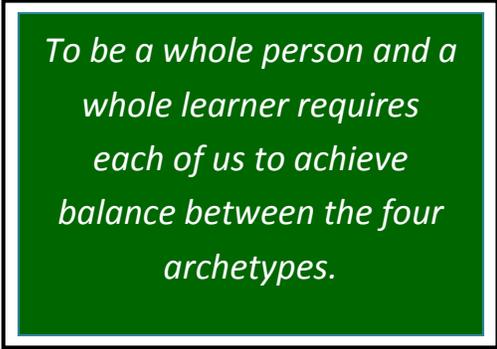
> *To be a whole person and a whole learner requires each of us to achieve balance between the four archetypes.*

The Visionary

The *Visionary* is guided by the principle of telling the truth without blame or judgement. By following the way of the *Visionary* we are able to make the truth visible.

Creativity can be unleashed when we move beyond the ideas of "wrongdoing" and "rightdoing." The *Visionary* encourages us to bring our creativity and voice to the world. Psychoanalyst Rollo May explains it this way: *"If you do not express your own original ideas, if you do not listen to your own being, you will have betrayed yourself."*

The Teacher

The way of the *Teacher* accesses the human resource of wisdom. The principle guiding the Teacher is to be *open to outcome* but not attached to it. The *Teacher* has wisdom, teaches trust, and practices detachment. This allows one to be flexible and adaptable to other possibilities.

Trust is the source from which the qualities of wisdom develop: *clarity, objectivity, discernment, and detachment.* Wisdom is being exercised when we are open to all possibilities. Indigenous cultures access wisdom by learning how to trust and to be comfortable with the state of not knowing. Those who are not comfortable with not knowing and who dislike surprises (ie, those wanting to control the uncontrollable) have

attachments, fixed perspectives, and a strong need for control. By being attached, we lose our objectivity and become inflexible.

To be a true lifelong learner requires that each of us work hard at achieving balance among the four archetypes. At work, it means showing concern about our co-workers and helping them strive for balance so that they, too, will become stronger learners.

The Whole Person

Becoming a whole person also means that the individual has reached a higher level in what is referred to as *emotional intelligence*, or *EI*. *EI* is very different from *IQ*. Instead of assessing one's "smarts" (the ratio of tested mental age to chronological age), *EI* seeks to reveal how one approaches life's problems and how one interacts with others. For example, someone with a high *IQ* may display poor interpersonal skills and a lack of maturity when dealing with conflict.

EI is seen as encompassing five primary areas ([Goleman](#)):

Understanding one's emotions: this involves self-awareness, which is the cornerstone of emotional intelligence.

Managing one's emotions: this is the ability to handle emotions properly. For example, someone who is able to do this effectively is able to recover quickly from an upsetting event.
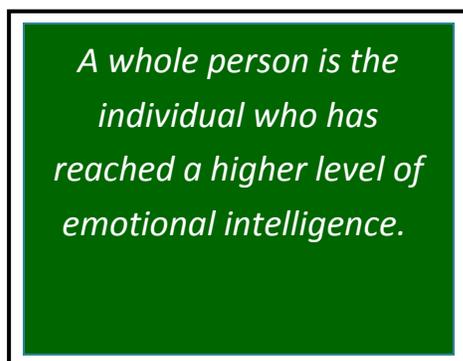
> *A whole person is the individual who has reached a higher level of emotional intelligence.*

Motivating oneself: the person who is successful here is more productive.

Recognizing emotions in others: this involves the empathy one shows to another individual who is experiencing a problem.

Handling relationships: People who are skilled at handling relationships are successful in situations involving people.

Considering that relationships are becoming an essential part of how progressive organizations operate, especially with the shift towards greater teamwork and decision-making by staff, *emotional intelligence* is quickly increasing in importance. A true learning organization places a high degree of emphasis on people possessing the

necessary *soft skills*. This involves dealing with peoples' feelings and emotions; how to listen with empathy; and how to encourage their intuitive side. Roger Enrico, former vice president of Pepsico, stated: *"The soft stuff is always harder than the hard stuff. ...Human interactions are a lot tougher to manage than numbers and P and Ls [profit and loss]. So the trick is to make the soft stuff hard, to operationalize it."*

Making the shift to an organization that is founded on bringing out the best in people and that nurtures learning in all its dimensions will not be easy for most organizations, but it will prove to be an exhilarating experience. Leaders face a daunting challenge, for they must model what it is we wish to become.

The aspect of modeling leadership behavior is succinctly expressed by Jean Kvasnica, a former secretary who progressed to a leadership position with one of Hewlett-Packard's sales teams: *"The kind of person I would follow, it's like there is a stick down through the center of them that's rooted in the ground. I can tell when someone has that. When they're not defensive, not egotistical. They're openminded, able to joke and laugh at themselves. They can take a volatile situation and stay focused. They bring out the best in me by making me want to handle myself in the same way. I want to be part of their world. When someone comes into the room with those attributes, it makes everyone in the room feel like we're all contributing."*

Stability is found in freedom – not in conformity and compliance.
Margaret Wheatley

A Final Word

Managers have their hands full today as their organizations ride a rollercoaster of continuous change. They are expected to be leaders, their actions consistent with what is now demanded of those guiding organizations into the next century: yielding control and sharing power with staff; tearing down barriers and promoting the free flow of information; nurturing the notion of lifelong learning; and enabling their people to get on with the business of serving customers and clients the best way possible.

Learning must not be seen as a one dimensional field. It is much more dynamic than that. In fostering a learning culture, one based on people assuming responsibility for their self-development, it is vital that people take the time to understand themselves in much more depth and to use reflection as a key component of learning. This increases in complexity when one adds the factor of teams. Not only do we need to understand ourselves better if we are to become more effective learners but we must also understand our teammates and how they learn.

If we pause and reflect upon the concept that organizations are in essence organisms, continually evolving and changing shape, it becomes much easier for us to understand what we are all going through. And it becomes easier for organizations to change for the better: people who are enthusiastic about learning continuously, who take a special interest in not only their own personal development but also that of their co-workers, who constantly explore new ideas, and who just plain love going to work each and every day.

Organizations that are able to accomplish this will face the challenges of the 21st Century with vigor and confidence. They will become the thinking organizations of the new century.

In order to thrive in a world of change and chaos, we will need to accept chaos as an essential process by which natural systems, including organizations, renew and revitalize themselves.

Kevin McCarey
(Videoscript, Leadership and the New Science)

Learning Organization Assessment

Note the number you believe is appropriate for each question – *this assessment is also available online by [clicking here](), or at: http://www.deltapartners.ca/learningorg*

1 = Not at all
2 = To a slight extent
3 = To a moderate extent
4 = To a great extent
5 = To a very great extent

The current reality in my organization is:

1. Critical thinking is encouraged, in which people feel free to disagree and challenge without fear of reprisal.

2. Mistakes are seen as an important part of the learning process.

3. The belief prevails that it's always possible to find a better way to achieve objectives.

4. Exploring and trying out new concepts is actively encouraged.

5. There is a desire to eliminate traditional ways of doing work with the intent of finding more effective ways of working.

6. Management shows leadership in embracing continuous learning.

7. The quality of life in the workplace is improving steadily.

8. Structures are being replaced with processes, in which people are able to easily share information and what they learn with co-workers.

9. The organization is designed for problem-solving and learning.

10. People not only have a clear understanding of their own work but also know where they fit in with the organization's mission and its direction.

11. Staff are not only permitted but encouraged to engage in learning at work, including using such resources as learning centres and libraries.

12. Managers and staff are rotated periodically around different jobs in order to give them greater exposure to the organization's business and to help them grow and develop.

13. Uncertainty is seen as an opportunity to experiment and acquire new skills.

14. Anxiety and stress are kept to a minimum since people see change as a positive force in the organization's evolution.

15. People take responsibility for their personal and career development.

16. The organization provides an atmosphere that is conducive to people developing themselves.

17. Managers must follow a program that prepares them for their roles as coach, facilitator, and leader.

18. Peoples' different learning styles are understood and appreciated.

19. Managers enable their staff to be self-directed learners and to strive for continuous improvement.

20. Team learning is fostered and seen as a key component of building a learning culture.

Scoring:

80+   The organization has a well developed learning culture. At the lower end of the scale, care must be taken to maintain momentum and to nurture learning.

60 - 79   The organization has potential for establishing a strong learning culture. At the lower end of the scale, considerable work must still be done to move the organization forward.

40 - 59   Little is being done in the organization to promote continuous learning. Better get started!

< 40   The organization's future is in jeopardy.

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