Reflections

The SoL Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change
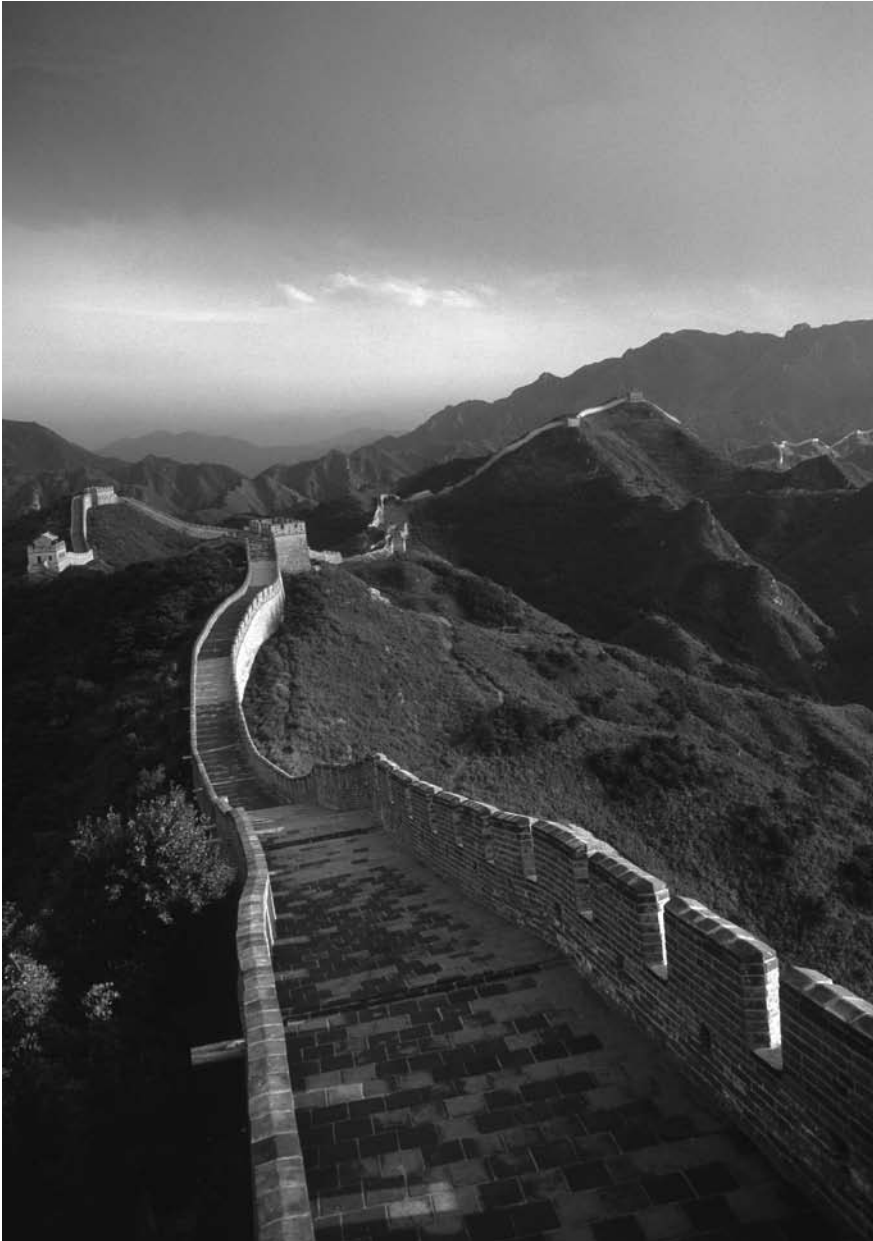
society for SoL
organizational learning

IN THIS FINAL ISSUE OF VOLUME 6 OF *REFLECTIONS*, we consider the consequences of culture for learning in practice, and benefit from a diverse set of illustrations in three feature articles and two contributions to our Emerging Knowledge Forum. Because we recognize that you are more than "readers," and that learning is supported by a variety of resources, we are also introducing audio downloads as part of this issue. We look forward to your feedback about this new feature.

At SoL's Research Greenhouse in 2004, Ed Schein, professor emeritus at MIT's Sloan School of Management, a founding father of the field of organizational development, and one of SoL's first trustees shared his own cross-cultural journey, and how it has shaped his own practice. His story is told as a drama in five acts: "From Brainwashing to Organizational Therapy: A Conceptual and Empirical Journey in Search of Systemic Health and a General Model of Change Dynamics." We are delighted to share an article based on his talk, as well as the original talk itself as an audio download.

In various public statements, the leadership of China has stated its aspiration to be a learning country. Darl G. Kolb and Tianjian Jiang share their observations and research in "Organizational Learning in China: Inroads and Implications for the Awakening Dragon." SoL China Project Coordinator C. Will Zhang poses the possibility that organizational learning may be both the first and last imported "antidote" that will help China reconnect with its rich history of harmony between action and reflection. In further comments, Zhaoliang Qui (with Stephen Meng and Glenn Lauder) shares his experience of learning organization work in China, and a framework for encouraging a learning culture.
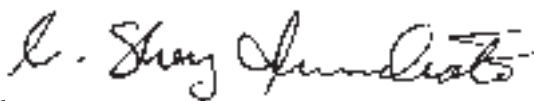
The language of systems thinking has often served a means to span organizational and cultural boundaries. "Hindustan Petroleum's Structural Analysis of Current Reality," by Ashis Sen, one of the company's team of internal coaches, documents how a locally dispersed regional sales team used this analysis to build a shared understanding of how they could effectively achieve the results they care about most.

Service projects in Sri Lanka following the tsunami provide the context for learning for managers from Unilever's Asian food business. "Sri Lanka: A Story of Hope" by Karen Ayas continues to document the leadership development approach of cultural immersion originally reported in the book *To the Desert and Back*, and in prior issues of *Reflections*.

Kufunda Village in Zimbabwe is the setting for "Stories from an African Learning Village" as told by village co-founder Marianne Knuth. One of the local community members supported by the village reports this benefit: "I was helped to see myself as a person first. Not as a poor person." This shift in mindset from poverty and helplessness to dignity and possibility is the heart of the Kufunda culture. Those who question the practicality of appreciative inquiry should find its use in this setting illuminating.

Finally, we appreciate our ability to promote dialogue on topics raised in prior issues. Dennis Sandow offers a connection between his own work (reported on earlier this year in *Reflections*) and Alain de Vulpian's recent article. Readers (and listeners), please continue to write!

We expect to send the first issue of Volume 7 – and, if your subscription includes it, the printed compilation of Volume 6 – in February. Happy New Year!

C. Sherry Immediato

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Managing Director, SoL

AN ARISING SOCIAL ORDER

ALAIN DE VULPIAN'S "LISTENING TO ORDINARY PEOPLE" *(Reflections, 5.6–7)* is a very important paper for the SOL community. De Vulpian describes a social transformation that is already underway – a self-organizing and self-regulating social system of networks that are generating personal and social well being.

For the past 15 years I have been studying the same phenomena. Using ethnography and social network mapping I have also been listening to "ordinary people," workers in organizations in Latin America, the U.S., and in China. It has been joyful to learn of workers supporting people with disabilities, engineers recycling waste water and creating hyper-pure drinking water, cooks cooking organic meals for their co-workers, and workers teaching school children. As Alain de Vulpian explains, these are dynamic and collaborative social systems that are replacing out-of-date, self-centric hierarchies in business, education, and government. This is a spontaneous social order arising from the emotion of love, in which ordinary people are creating extraordinary value. In one study, I documented how middle school cooks, while cooking nutritious meals for children, simultaneously taught students, faculty, and administrators mathematics in a network of collaboration. In all my years of research, I have never mapped a hierarchical social network (organization chart), but instead have mapped social systems where everyone in the network considers everyone else in the network a legitimate contributor. As described by Professor Humberto Maturana, social systems arising through the emotion of love are the source of intelligent action and vision. I believe that love is the organizing emotion in the new global society.

The arising social order Alain de Vulpian describes is happening now! Formal change management programs, tired organizational change strategies, and attempts to change people are no longer relevant means to creating a better world. Through the process of collective reflection which I call "social action research," I have found that social systems which generate social, biological, and financial well-being are commonplace in networks of ordinary people. It is not change, but conservation that we should attend to. Conserving the emergent social systems of social, biological, and financial well-being lies at the heart of the new economy. This will bring forth a new visioning process through which we can generate the future we wish to live.

I'd like to thank Alain de Vulpian for sharing his 50 years of social research. The longitudinal ethnographic research he has led is a tremendous gift for those of us interested in, and committed to, the development of modern organizations.

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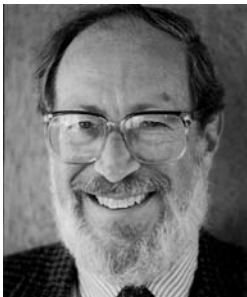
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Send your comments, questions, and suggestions to *reflections@solonline.org*.

From Brainwashing to Organizational Therapy:

A Conceptual and Empirical Journey in Search of "Systemic" Health and a General Model of Change Dynamics

A DRAMA IN FIVE ACTS

By Edgar H. Schein

Edgar H. Schein

Introduction

Neither individual health nor organizational/systemic health can be understood without the ability to take three different perspectives: 1) An individual perspective based on psychology; 2) a systemic perspective based on anthropology, sociology, political science and systems theory; and 3) An interactive process perspective based on social psychology, sociology and other theories of dynamic processes.

Individual perspectives are needed to understand the idiosyncrasies of the component parts of any system; systemic perspectives are needed to define what "health" or effective performance means at a systemic level and how culture forms and evolves; and interactive perspectives are needed to understand the dynamic interactions that occur between different components and levels of any system.

The never-ending dilemma of the individual vs. the group, organization or society, whether leaders create organizations and cultures or whether culture and social forces create leaders, how organizations influence their members and, at the same time, how members change the organization cannot be understood without seeing the interplay between the system and the individual.

I have been fortunate in my 50 plus years of involvement both with individuals and with organizations to be able to observe and experience social phenomena from these various levels and perspectives. In this drama I hope to share some of the main lessons learned from these experiences.

Prologue

As I look back on my life, I see more clearly than I used to how early influences shaped my concepts and skills (1993b). I was born in 1928 in Zurich, Switzerland where my father was finishing his Ph.D. in Physics. He was a Hungarian who had grown up in Czechoslovakia and was, therefore, a Czech citizen. In Zurich, he met my mother who was a German from a small resort town on the Elbe near Dresden. In 1934 the Swiss made it difficult for my father to retain his Assistant Professorship so he emigrated to Odessa where the Russians offered him a big job in order to build their science establishment.

We moved to Odessa where we lived in a large apartment complex. I did not go to a Russian school but did learn the language from friends my age in the playground. Our life in Russia included many trips to the Caucasus and Moscow and was generally very pleasant, but by 1936 Stalin's purges were beginning to affect foreigners so my father decided to move. We ended up in Prague where I went to a very strict German school for one year. My father had established a link with the University of Chicago and planned to go there as soon as possible since Hitler was beginning to be a threatening force in Europe. My mother and I moved to Zurich for half a year to get out of Czechoslovakia and emigrated to Chicago in 1938. My father had secured a professorship at Chicago where he spent the rest of his career.

These events are relevant in that I had, by age 10, to learn Russian, Czech, and then English, and had made four cultural transitions. I particularly remember the difficulty of deciphering American playground norms in the Chicago public grammar school. Later concerns with being careful when encountering new cultures, with not making too many premature assumptions, and with shaping diagnostic skills in the here-and-now situation all derived from these early experiences. I also learned how to adapt quickly to new situations, a skill,

which I now realize, was essential to doing effective consulting with organizations. This adaptive capacity shaped my career in many ways, as will be seen.

A Hutchins-style General Education. Public high school at Hyde Park High led directly to entering the University of Chicago that was operating by the general education system that granted a bachelor's degree after two years. I did not really know what I wanted (I tried physics and failed badly at it), so I stayed an additional year without a major. During that year I learned in the General Biology Course about Carl Rogers and his theory of therapy based on reflecting back to patients their own constructions rather than giving expert interpretations. My fellow students and I thought this was really funny and would go around campus "mirroring each other." Psychology did intrigue me, however, so I sought out a place to major in it.

Stanford Bachelors and Masters. Stanford with its four-quarter system proved to be the ideal place to concentrate into one academic year an entire major, and, in that process, to discover that what I really liked was social psychology and the experiments on social influence, which were being done by Sherif, Asch and others. I decided to stay another year and get a Masters Degree which involved doing an experiment under the guidance of Harry Helson. His theory of Adaptation Level was being applied to social situations so I did an experiment to see how weight judgments were influenced by hearing others make those judgments in a rigged experimental situation.

Harvard Social Relations. By the spring of 1949 I had taken every relevant psychology course that Stanford had to offer, so the decision to get a Ph.D. also required relocation. I wanted a Social Psychology program so the choice was Michigan or Harvard's Department of Social Relations that combined Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology into a single program. Within that framework one could major in Clinical or Social Psychology. The major attraction that drew me to Harvard was the active presence of Gordon Allport, Henry Murray, Jerry Bruner, Talcott Parsons, Sam Stouffer, Clyde and Florence Kluckhohn, David McClelland, and a host of younger faculty and graduate students in all of the fields.

In 1950 the military draft was still operating so I chose to enter the Army Clinical Psychology Program that provided financial support at the level of Second Lieutenant in exchange for a three-year stint in the regular army Medical Service Corps as a psychologist after obtaining the Ph.D. Harvard required a one-year internship as part of the Ph.D. program, and the Army provided the opportunity for spending a year at Walter Reed Hospital as a Clinical Psychologist doing primarily diagnostic work for the resident psychiatrists.

For my dissertation experiment I chose to work with Richard Solomon and Gordon Allport to determine whether human subjects would learn to imitate someone else whose judgments seemed more accurate than their own, and whether they would continue to imitate on other tasks that varied in similarity to the original one. I was able to use Army inductees for my experiment. The experiment was a success so I was able to finish my dissertation by the end of 1952 (Schein, 1954).

Chorus

The decision to go to Harvard was fateful in providing the exposure, mostly through fellow graduate students and some courses, to an interdisciplinary way of thinking. While experimentation was clearly the way to do psychology, learning about diagnostics from testing with Rorschach and TAT tests, learning that anthropology was done in the field by living with members of other tribes and observing them closely, and learning that large scale surveys

could reveal social patterns not visible without statistics broadened the whole base of what constitutes scientific inquiry.

It was apparent that "science" comes in several forms and it was essential to learn that there was no one method superior to all of the others. In fact, later in my career I learned that science was a culture in its own right, and that there were many sacred cows in each field, and even within sub-fields. Gordon Allport was a special influence on me in his insistence on good historical understanding of one's own field and good writing. He was a merciless critic of the writing in the dissertation.

Adaptive ability had to be learned repeatedly. The choice to join the Army to insure the continued use of psychology, the use of the military connection to get subjects for the dissertation experiment, the clinical internship at Walter Reed were all opportunities to create a broad base for later work.

Though I did not realize it at the time, the exposure to other disciplines and to the real world of Walter Reed Hospital was critical in forming my later thinking about organizations. As long as I was focused on narrow experiments on imitation, there was no need to worry about how sociology and anthropology influenced these phenomena, but as I was to discover later, once one tries to conceptualize human systems on a broader scale, it cannot be done without an interdisciplinary point of view (as we will see).

The implications for graduate training are tremendous. Should all graduate students be required to do a year of "real work" in organizations as part of their graduate training?

Act I. Brainwashing or Coercive Persuasion—The Power of the System (Culture, Indoctrination, Socialization)

Scene 1: The Military and the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research

The decision to join the Army was validated by their assigning me to the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research where I joined an exciting interdisciplinary group under the leadership of the brilliant Sullivanian psychiatrist David Rioch. If Gordon Allport was my first important mentor, David Rioch was clearly the second one. He encouraged me to develop my own research program focusing on influence and leadership. I was well on the way to designing some new experiments in this domain when fate intervened.

Scene 2: Korea and the Study of Repatriates

One morning in 1953 a telegram arrived from Army HQ's ordering me to appear at Travis Air Force Base in 72 hours, no further explanation offered. However, several of my colleagues at Walter Reed who were also in the Army received the same telegram so we knew something big was up. When we were all gathered we were told that we would fly to Japan for further briefing, then on to Inchon, Korea where we would meet with a group of repatriates being exchanged for U.S. held prisoners as part of "Big Switch" and the armistice that had been signed with the North Koreans and Chinese. A previous exchange of sick and wounded prisoners some months earlier had revealed that some U.S. prisoners had "collaborated with the enemy" and had been indoctrinated to an unknown degree. Repatriates were therefore to be put on ships for the 16-day voyage to San Francisco. A psychiatric team would join each ship to assess the mental state of the repatriates and provide whatever therapy they might need before being returned home.

When I got to Inchon I was told that my ship would be delayed for three weeks and that I should just wait in the repatriation center where truckloads of repatriates were coming in every day. Since I was very interested in social influence I decided to pull repatriates randomly off the line and interview them about their prison camp experiences. I asked each repatriate just to tell me his story from the moment of his capture. These stories fell into clear patterns that resulted in my being able to define in general terms what the Chinese indoctrination program consisted of, why it worked on a few people, and why most of the captives did not succumb to any collaborative behavior (Schein, et al, 1961).

But "brainwashing" based on Edward Hunter's 1951 book that freely translated the Chinese concept of "cleansing the mind of middle class values" took hold as a concept, in part because some of the western civilian businessmen, students and priests captured on the mainland did come out of prison admitting that they were criminals and spies (which was not true), that they were treated leniently in being allowed out of prison after just a few years, and that the U.S. and the West clearly did not understand the validity of the Communist point of view.

Further study of what happened under Chinese captivity became a central concern of interest and displaced forever my commitment to experimentation as the central way of gathering data. I began a several year study that led to the 1961 book entitled "Coercive Persuasion." I realized that the indoctrination methods used were quite similar whether one was talking about religious training, or any other form of indoctrination. The message might be different but the process was essentially the same.

Chorus

While at Walter Reed the exposure to interdisciplinary work was again critical. The group had an endocrinologist, several Skinnerian behaviorists, an ecologists studying crowding in rat colonies, a statistician, and a number of psychiatrists and clinical psychologists. Most important, however, was that David Rioch had hired several consultants who came on a quarterly basis to share their views with the group. One of these was Erving Goffman whose influence was deep and lasting. Rarely has one person's writing so completely taken hold as "truth." To this day, people do not take Goffman's work seriously enough.

Many important lessons derived from this early work:
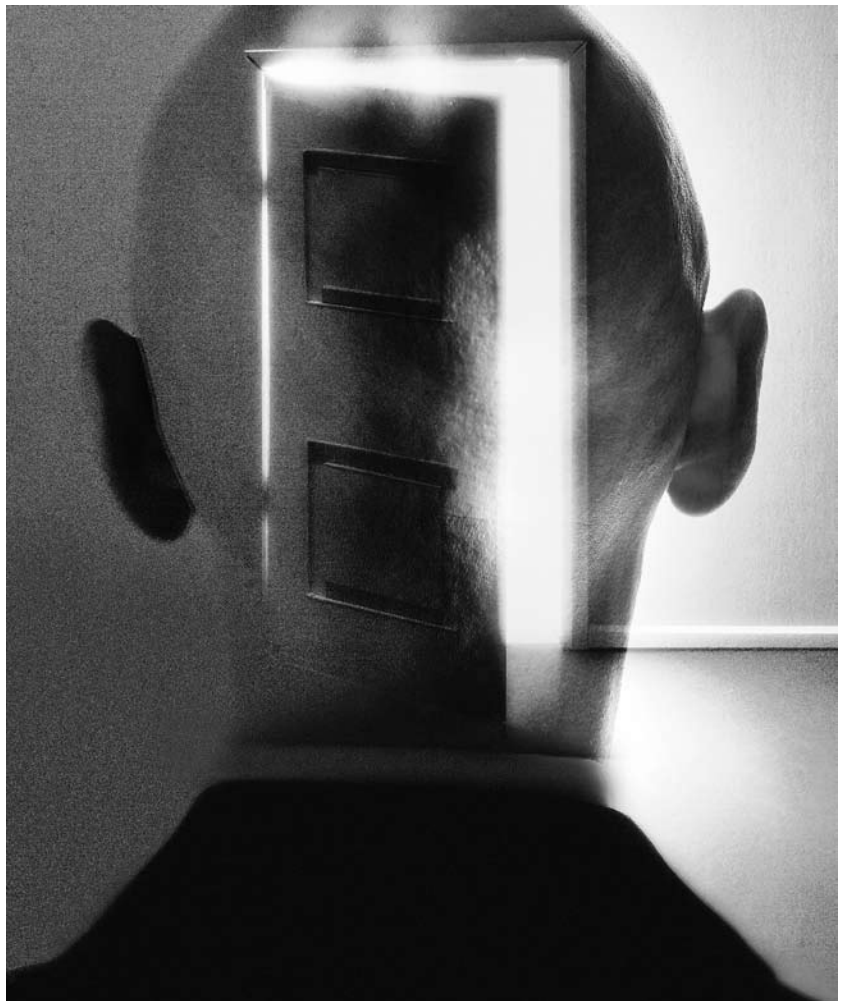
- Group/Organizational forces are stronger than individual forces, but under coercive conditions some individuals are more active than others with mixed results. In other words, collaborators and intense resisters were similar in many personality aspects, particularly the temperamental bias toward action.
- Change must be distinguished from "new learning" in that it implies some unlearning which is intrinsically difficult and usually painful.
- Change begins with "disconfirmation," some upsetting of the "quasi-stationary equilibrium."
- Motivation to change does not arise until the change target feels secure enough to accept the disconfirming data because the new things to be learned begin be feasible. The change target feels "psychologically safe" if he or she can accept a new attitude or value without complete loss of self.
- Once the individual feels psychologically safe, he or she can accept new information either through identification with others or scanning the environment for new solutions.
- Change then occurs by "cognitive redefinition" through: 1) Semantic change in old concepts, i.e. the Chinese communist definition of crime and spying was "any behavior that could be harmful to the state" hence innocent postcards could be viewed as spying by passing on potentially harmful information to a potential or actual enemy. 2) Change in "adaptation level" or judgment standards as to how a given behavior or perceived object is to be judged, i.e. seemingly trivial types of information by U.S. standards were viewed as important intelligence information by the communists. 3) Introduction of new concepts and meanings, i.e. the abstraction of the "communist state" which could be harmed in the future and, therefore, justified seemingly excessive protection.
- The more ambiguous the situation, the more the individual will rely on the perceptions and judgments of others, i.e. the prisoner finally learned these new meanings and standards from fellow prisoners more advanced in their "thought reform."
- New concepts and standards will not survive unless they are socially and personally reinforced, confirmed, i.e. once the repatriate retuned to the U.S. they relearned our own definitions and standards, except in one case of a husband and wife who were imprisoned together and continued to maintain their newly learned views after returning to the U.S.

These cognitive and social dynamics proved to be a good model for organizational change projects I became involved with later. Often it is what we learn early in life that is the most valid and profound (Schein, et al, 1961).

Act II. Career Anchors – The Power of the Individual (Leadership, Entrepreneurship, Personal Integrity)

Scene 1: The Decision to join a Management School

After five years at Walter Reed I decided to pursue my academic career which boiled down to a decision between an assistant professorship in the Cornell Psychology Department or in the MIT School of Industrial Management. Though I was unsure about going to a professional school, the invitation from Douglas McGregor and my previous exposure to MIT via a seminar taught by Alex Bavelas biased me toward MIT and a career that involved more

applied than experimental work. I joined the Sloan School in 1956 and spent the rest of my career there.

After finishing the work on coercive persuasion I decided to study how corporations indoctrinate their employees and launched a panel study involving detailed career analysis of MIT Masters alumni. The evidence for indoctrination was mixed, but a 13-year follow up of the panel revealed a brand new concept –"Career Anchors." As people matured they formed a self-image around their motivations, competences and values that served to guide and constrain career decisions. The concept and the interview methodology used to determine career anchors has proven to be an important contribution to career theory and an important tool in career counseling and coaching (Schein, 1971, 1975, 1978, 1985).

Chorus

• The degree to which change can be imposed depends on the degree to which the change target can "leave the field;" if the target can be coerced into staying in the field, change will inevitably occur, in part through "self-socialization" or "acculturation."

• If the change target seeks the change, he or she will voluntarily enter the relevant field and become "self-socialized."

• If the individual does not wish to change, he or she will seek "fields" in which there is no change pressure.

• In the end, the degree to which the individual is subject to outside influences is then a function of his or her freedom to move, which, in the case of career influences depends very much on the state of the labor market.

In the study of coercive persuasion I learned how powerful the group can be. But in an open society, I later learned that individuals are equally powerful, if they can choose their own settings.

Act III. Process Consultation (Interaction of the Change Agent and the Change Target – Client)

Scene 1: Exposure to and involvement with the National Training Labs and "T-groups"

In the summer of 1957 I attended my first leadership and group dynamics workshop in Bethel, Maine where I was exposed to the whole concept of studying groups by analyzing our own group process. I found this to be a crucial experience in differentiating what I knew from

my academic training from what I learned through direct experience. I also found that traditional teaching and learning was a very weak experience compared to the immediate here-and-now feedback that occurred when groups analyzed their own process and members gave each other face-to-face feedback. Experiential learning became central to my own sense of how one learns in the human interaction domain (Schein & Bennis, 1965; Schein, 1993a).

Scene 2: Learning to consult in organizational contexts and the evolution of Process Consultation

The role of the "trainer" in the T-groups opened another area of insight—the role of the process observer and intervener. I learned within the group and in subsequent consulting encounters that the most effective intervention was not expert advice but 1) facilitating the client's own understanding of his or her own problem and 2) teaming up with the client to jointly develop a solution. This brought me back full circle to Carl Rogers and his theory of how to conduct therapy. I learned that most consultants attempted to recommend expert solutions and most of those solutions were not implemented because they ignored critical factors in the clients situation. I had learned in the T-group that one does not really understand a situation until the participants have explored it themselves, and that the solution to problems have to come from the participants if they are to be implemented. Based on these experiences, especially the frustration of seeing how being an expert did not lead to any meaningful change in human systems, I developed a different model and called it "process consultation" (Schein, 1969, 1987, 1999).

The solution to problems have to come from the participants of they are to be implemented.

Chorus

• Working with groups and organizations revealed the need to take problem centered view in that most of the group activities were geared to improving the present situation in some way or another. The connection to "therapy" became obvious, but in group and organizational contexts it was group and family therapy that provided the most help not individual therapy. The models used by family therapists were the most useful because they were dealing with entire family systems not just individual patients. Such systemic thinking also revealed that the change target in a complex system is not necessarily the person that the therapist would work with. Redefining member roles and working with parts of the system that were more ready to change prove to be powerful change levers.

• The conceptual link between consulting to organizations and therapy led to explorations of family therapy and systemic therapy concepts (Bateson, 1972; Watzlawick, et al, 1974). The publication in 1965 of "Organizational Psychology" was one of the first efforts to define the systemic nature of organizations as contrasted with the mechanical models of "Industrial Psychology" that were extant at that time (Schein, 1965, 1970, 1980).

• The emphasis on "process" was missing in most organization theories, yet process reveals structure and is the dynamic that drives the system, hence better analyses of process such as those we were doing in the T-groups became an essential characteristic of how to study and work with organizations.

There is a kind of irony in the fact that I was working all of this time in many countries and was exposed to both national and organizational cultures, but was so focused on "process" that I never looked carefully at the content of what was being transmitted, i.e. culture.

Act IV. Culture—Dynamics of Complex Social Systems

Scene 1: Long range consulting with Ciba-Geigy and Digital Equipment Corporation.

I was, of course, familiar with the concept of culture from my graduate student days, but it was the contrast between the two companies that were for many years my client that really brought home to me how much difference culture makes to how an organization works. Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) was entrepreneurial, academic, electrical engineering driven and was developing the entirely new technology of interactive computing. It was based in New England and reflected very much the U.S. culture. Ciba-Geigy (CG) was an old chemical company in Basel, run by the "Basel Mafia" of lawyers, chemists, and chemical engineers, reflecting age, chemistry, and Swiss-German culture.

The culture model of "Artifacts," "Espoused Values," and "Tacit Taken-for-Granted Assumptions" grew out of the dramatic contrasts that these companies provided at every level. I learned that people used the concept of culture at every level, so it was critical to identify what one should think of as the essence of culture – the shared tacit assumptions.

I began writing about culture in the early 1980's partly because of my own observations and partly because the impact of the "Japanese style of management" was being felt everywhere. The notion that there are different ways to manage which create different organizational cultures became very evident (Schein, 1981, 1985, 1990, 1992, 1999, 2004).

Scene 2: The Evolution of the Clinical Perspective

When I decided to write about organizational culture, I found that my research data were primarily the observations I had made during my actual consulting visits. I found, once again, that the most relevant data come not from surveys or experiments, but from direct observation and direct personal experience. I evolved further what I came to call the "clinical perspective" in emphasizing data that surfaced not by passive observation as would be the case in ethnography, but by responding to requests for help in various ways and observing the reaction and impacts of different kinds of interventions (Schein, 1987, 1995, 2001b).

These experiences strongly confirmed the Kurt Lewin observation that "you do not really understand an organization (system) until you try to change it." I also noticed that the longitudinal study of groups and organizations makes clear how all systems need stable self-images just as much as individuals do, and vary as much as individuals do in terms of their own learning histories. In organizations one could observe what the anthropologist could rarely observe – how cultures begin and evolve.

I became more aware of the cyclical nature of life. Individuals create organizations that develop cultures and organizations acculturate individuals; the balance between individual and organizational autonomy is a perpetual struggle forever modulated by dynamic "psychological contracts" between employer and employed. Leadership in starting an organization is a completely different process from leadership in a mature organization that is trying to change some elements of its culture. Leaders create cultures through imposing their personal values and assumptions on their colleagues and employees, but as the organization develops a shared view, i.e. "culture," it imprints itself on its members who may then create yet other organizations on this same model (Higgins, 2005).

Scene 3: Organizational systems dynamics—the discovery of the power of subgroups and subcultures (the DEC story) to influence the destiny of social systems

Perhaps the biggest insight from years of consulting with DEC was the discovery that with success and growth, subsystems develop and these, in turn, develop cultures of their own. What is even more dramatic is the discovery that these sub-cultures may conflict with each other, making the managerial process inside organizations comparable to what it might be like to managing in the United Nations. When one sees the wars that develop between sub-systems, one realizes why "hierarchy" as a control mechanism is so important in complex human systems (1996b, 2003).

Scene 4: Taking culture seriously and becoming culturally humble

As my written works circulated in Europe and Asia, I received more invitations to teach in various countries and learned how the same kind of material and teaching approach goes over very differently in China, Japan, Brazil, France, Mexico, Germany, Singapore, Denmark, the UK, Italy, and Chile. I also discovered that when doing process consultation in another culture it is essential to work with someone from that culture to avoid mistakes that might hurt the client (Schein, 1996a).

Chorus

• Once people make sense of their world collectively, creating norms and developing tacit assumptions, those norms and assumptions define reality, the individual's identity and group membership. Individual change at this level can only be accomplished by group level interventions in that one cannot change shared assumptions or norms by changing one individual unless that person is the leader and imposes a new set coercively. And then things will change only if the behavior deriving from the new norms work better.

   • Assumptions that work, i.e. enable the group to survive in its environment and to integrate internally, become more stable and unchangeable.

   • The organization's culture can be destroyed by destroying the organization as a cultural entity (by removing key people who are culture carriers), but the assumptions will live on in the individuals as parts of their identity.

   • With growth and success organizations evolve sub-groups which evolve sub-cultures; if those sub-cultures are not aligned, if they begin to conflict with each other, such conflicts are the greatest source of systems pathology.

Act V. Interaction, Change, and Therapy

Scene 1: The realization that health can only be defined as an interactive coping process in a social and cultural field.

The more I examined process consultation and observed my own behavior as a consultant, the more I realized that what consultants do is very akin to therapy, but this formulation is not acceptable to most managerial clients. Organizational pathologies of all sorts are very evident whenever one gets into client situations, and the clinical perspective is always the most useful and relevant, but in working with organizational cultures one must learn to use the metaphors and linguistic categories that make sense to them and enable them to save face

and avoid defensiveness. I realized that the best kind of "therapy" draws on personal and cultural strengths even though the process is triggered by pathology, weakness or problems. The consultant/therapist must learn to draw out the strengths in the culture and show how they can be used to solve the problems facing the organization.

Scene 2: Ambivalence about Organization Development (OD) and Organizational Learning (OL)

In my last 15 years or so at MIT a proliferation of "techniques" purporting to improve organizations sprang up under various labels and under the broad umbrella of organizational development (OD) and organizational learning (OL). My discomfort with both of these fields and communities of practice grew out of the recognition that they were highly normative without an underlying model or theory of health and pathology. The clinical perspective is normative, but the norms one strives for are based on an underlying model or theory that fits a wider reality.

In much of OD and OL practitioners sought to make organizations more humane and/or more efficient and/or more socially responsible without examining how those organizations themselves fit into a larger social system and what was possible to do, given their functions in the system. The process consultation model argued for locating the client's reality before imposing the consultant's norms.

I found myself quite involved in the teaching of process consultation as an important set of principles underlying OD, and I worked for many years with Peter Senge and the Society for Organizational Learning, helping to found and edit their journal *Reflections*. This was an effort to improve communications between scholars, consultants, and organizational clients but was only a partial success because the professional and occupational sub-cultures of these groups were too strong and too self-referential. My focus in these last years of full time work continued to be on the use of the clinical perspective to understand better the dynamics of social systems without getting prematurely into prescriptions of how they ought to function or what values they should hold.

Chorus

• With age there comes a sense of history and a sense of how very little is really new in life, and a sense of perspective about the complexity of the world out there

   • With the growth of technology and globalization have come many more organizational dilemmas that highlight the degree to which we do not yet really understand organizational and managerial dynamics well enough to be prescriptive about them.

Epilogue

Concepts that we publish lead us into new areas, sometimes in surprising ways. My work on culture has been picked by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna leading to a request to give a talk on "Safety Culture" in 2002. That, in turn has led the Institute for Nuclear Power Operations (INPO) to invite me to join their Advisory Board, again to work on safety culture. As one of my friends pointed out, isn't it strange that I grew up in the shadow of the creation of atomic energy when I was in Chicago at the University, rejected physics as a field, but have ended up applying what I did learn to one of the outcomes of that very field. I have also been asked to consult on cultural matters with New York's Con Edison

company to help them become more effective in the environmental, health and safety areas. Most recently this has led to being recruited to work on "safety" in the health care industry

I am left at this point (age 77) with more of a sense of realism about self, individuals, groups, organizations, societies, and health itself. The unfinished business is to figure out how teaching, consulting, therapy and other modes of influence draw on the same basic change model, but do so differently and with different goals and results. Naturalists, magicians, priests, shamans and mystics all can teach and influence behavior, but they do so in such different ways as to make us realize how contextual our knowledge must be if we are to be useful.

Deep down I think organization studies is still in a pre-Darwinian state of development.

I find that the most stimulating way to proceed is to stay open and humble, get in touch with my own biases and filters so that I can see and hear what is really out there. Deep down I think organization studies is still in a pre-Darwinian state of development. We do not yet know what the key categories of variables are around which to build our field, but the search for them is great fun.

As I look back I also realize that I have been as much a practitioner as a scholar, or, rather, I found the most productive research to be an active practice of trying to help organizations. In reflecting on practice, I realize how much of it is artistry (1993b, 2001a). I have often found myself saying to practitioners in workshops that they need three things:

1) They need to learn to think like an *anthropologist*, accepting culture for what it is, suspending judgment until they see it from the "native point of view" and using the strengths of the culture to change those elements that have become dysfunctional;

2) They need to develop the skills of a *family therapist*, accepting the fact that human systems are complex and difficult to change; and

3) They need to trust their own *artistic impulse* in deciding what kind of intervention to make in a human system. There will always be more data than they can absorb, there will always be surprises, and there will never be enough predictability to determine a "correct" course of action. Just as the artist interacts with his or her blank canvas, so the practitioner must interact with his or her client system and rely on artistic instinct to decide how to proceed.

The artistic impulse provides several final perspectives. Much of what we learn from experience remains tacit and can only be expressed artistically. It is no accident that when a colleague has said or done something that really strikes us, we say "that was *beautiful*." We underestimate the power of aesthetics to communicate the essential. Second, Don Schon reminded us years ago in his brilliant book *The Reflective Practitioner* that we cannot learn if we do not reflect. I have found that the best way to reflect is to face the empty canvas and think about what to put on it. Finally, artistic license gives us a chance to take some intellectual chances. Maybe what we produce is not right, but maybe it is, and maybe it will stimulate someone else more in the context of artistic expression than in the context of formal scholarship. In any case, it was great fun to write this little play.

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Organizational Learning in China: Inroads and Implications for the Awakening Dragon

By Darl G. Kolb and Tianjian Jiang

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China is becoming a major force within the global ecology of markets, cultures, and complex connectivity. In order to deal with this complexity, a growing number of educators, consultants and managers have been attracted to the notion of building learning organizations. Over the past 10 years, more and more Chinese consultants and training agencies have endeavored to facilitate the building of learning organizations, and an increasing number of Chinese organizations in different industries are working towards becoming learning organizations. This article provides a brief history of how the learning organization movement was introduced in China, how it is encouraged and supported by the Society for Organizational Learning, and how it is being adopted and adapted in one Chinese company.

Learning: East Meets West

Eric Tsang (1997) has argued that "we need to know more about how organizations in various cultures actually learn . . . cross-cultural studies making comparisons and highlighting contrasts are also useful." So far, Japan is the most often documented non-Western country portrayed as advocating learning on both organizational and national levels. Japanese authors and Japanese organizations have been cited in Western literature (Marquardt, 1996; Senge, 1990; Westney, 1992). Besides Japanese organizations, a few other Asian organizations, such as Singapore Airlines and Samsung, have been referred to as early and successful pioneers of organizational learning (Marquardt, 1996). Unfortunately, most non-Western organization cases cited in the literature are superficial (Easterby-Smith, 1997; Tsang, 1997). While the opening of markets in China and Eastern Europe to investment from Western countries has led to some research into learning within joint ventures (Easterby-Smith, 1997), exploring how organizational learning is being adapted in China may offer glimpses into Chinese organizations of the future.

Learning is one of the unique attributes that distinguishes human beings from other species (Schwandt & Marquardt, 2000). Moreover, humans seem to have a drive to learn (Dixon, 1999). If learning is universal among humans, is it not also relative to the specific cultural context in which the learner is situated? Consider the cultural relativity of "learning from experience" – one of the fundamental principles and implications of organizational learning. Philosophers from Eastern and Western civilizations have long pondered the nature of learning, in particular the role of experience in education. Aristotle and Socrates differed in their views of the roles of experience (Kraft, 1980). Aristotle believed that the mind was the dwelling place of wisdom and that the mind

could solve all of life's intellectual problems, whereas Socrates felt that experience could teach us a thing or two and that encountering real life was "in no way inferior" to thinking alone as a means to achieve wisdom. A century ago John Dewey (1900; Dewey, 1938; Hunt, 1995) explored the relationship between experience and learning, distinguishing between different but interconnected aspects of all experience. Dewey's views on education have inspired generations of scholars interested in how humans translate and integrate past experiences into future insights. For example, Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning features a cycle through which individual learning progresses (generally) in this order: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Of course, not all Western philosophers and scholars see reflection on experience as the essence of education and learning. Rote learning is the basis of much of the curriculum in both private (including "parochial" faith-based) and public school systems. Underpinning our understanding of rewards for memorization, behaviorists demonstrated how humans (and animals to a lesser, but significant, degree) "learn" from positive and negative reinforcement. Human resource management and remuneration systems knowingly or unwittingly apply reinforcement theory in many contemporary organizations. In organizations, we usually "get what we count," that is to say, results follow rewards, and vice versa.

By contrast, Peter Senge (1990) presented the concept of organizational learning as being "more consistent with human nature," enabling people to balance "the desire for continuity with the desire to be creative." Consistent with Western philosophy, Senge's model integrates theory with practice, e.g., "conceptualizing the big picture and testing ideas in practice." Within the learning organization framework, dynamic social forces, i.e., creative tension, theory, and practice, are natural components of the "whole" organization, and this holism is important to understanding both "learning" and "organization." Organizational learning is described by Schwandt and Marquardt as "a very complex interrelationship between people,

actions, symbols, and process within the organization" (2000).

Looking to Eastern views on learning, it is clear that Chinese civilization has, like the West, advocated learning and education throughout its long history. The ancient Chinese developed the concept of learning from their daily work and practice, represented by the two characters, "学" and "习". These two words were used separately because they represented different steps in the process of learning (Sang, 2000). "The first word means 'to study.' It is composed of two parts: a symbol that means 'to accumulate knowledge' above a symbol for a child in a doorway of a school. The second character means 'to practice constantly,' and it shows a bird developing the ability to leave the nest. The upper symbol represents flying and the low symbol refers to youth" (Senge, et al., 1994).

Confucius first studied the relationship between 学 and 习 in China. He stated in *The Analects* (1998), "to learn and in due time to repeat (practice) what one has learned, is that not after all a pleasure?" To Confucius, "study" is the foundation and prerequisite of "practice," and "practice" enhances and deepens one's knowledge (Sang, 2000). In the traditional Chinese culture, learning has been understood to have two ongoing important aspects: "study" and "practice constantly" together. Resonant with the Western appreciation of learning from experience through reflection, the ancient Chinese also understood the process of learning as a cycle involving: acquiring knowledge, reflecting, practicing and taking action, but in their eyes, practice was the most important element of the learning cycle.

Traditionally, education has been highly regarded in Chinese society. Confucianism stresses the importance of education to all people in society, without discrimination, to facilitate economic development and growth. Such growth stems from the acquisition of skills, diligence, patience, moderation, and perseverance (Bloom & Solotko, 2003). Confucianism also values learning and the ideals of social mobility, which are achieved by intellectual progression and development. Therefore, education and intellectual

life has been at the heart of the social and organizational infrastructure of China for many hundreds, if not thousands, of years (Turner & Acker, 2002).

In summary, both Eastern and Western cultural traditions value learning and education as fundamental to society. And, both value learning in various forms, including rote or memorized learning of facts, content, and some delivered "truths." In both traditions the importance of learning from experience has been emphasized. The idea of an organization "learning" is no more a metaphoric leap for the East than it is for the West. How this plays out in contemporary Chinese organizations and society is the focus of this study, but first, some additional context may be useful.

Cultural Context

To conduct research in the Chinese context, it is necessary to understand the background of Chinese culture. There is a wide agreement that "Confucianism is most clearly defined as the foundation of China's great cultural tradition, and Confucian values still provide the basis for the norms of Chinese interpersonal behavior" (Shenkar & Ronen, 1978). The Confucian tradition holds four key characteristics: 1) people-oriented and stressing love, 2) values-oriented, emphasizing the development of personal values, 3) practice-oriented and valuing people's potential to become enlightened and to achieve, and 4) whole-oriented and emphasizing natural, neutral harmony. Under Confucian principles the individual is an integral part of relationship networks (Zhou, Yin, & Cai, 1997).

Another mainstream of Chinese tradition is Taoism, which, like Confucianism, has deeply influenced Chinese politics, science, culture, and arts (Zhou et al., 1997). The source of Taoism was Lao-tzu, and the essence of Taoism is fundamentally dialectic. Taoism can be characterized by three core aspects: 1) mastering the principles of nature, 2) understanding that everything has two sides, and 3) seeing truth as relative (Zhou et al., 1997).

Economics and politics have been inextricably linked with the development of education throughout Chinese history (Zhaowu 1998). To a greater extent than in many other social contexts, education has been explicitly linked to the accession of political power, influence, and social mobility in China (Zhaowu 1998). Notwithstanding its respect for learning, traditional Chinese culture also held as one of its fundamental concepts of Confucianism "hierarchical relationships" (Hofstede & Bond, 1988), which play an important role in maintaining a person's position in the social hierarchy (Child, 1994). This led to a negative influence on Chinese learning and educational development. Respect for age and hierarchical position, for instance, can inhibit the acceptance of ideas and input (feedback) from younger and lower-position people.

People who were younger or lower in the social status were often restrained from challenging those at a higher level in the hierarchy. The cumulative effect was that people's desires and abilities for creative learning became highly constrained until learning began to refer solely to learning from the direction of elders and authorities. The concept of learning lost its emphasis on "study" and "practice" and rather became synonymous with copying and following. As one observer summarized it, "China developed and maintained a highly centralized indigenous educational tradition that carried with it heavy prescriptions for pedagogy and practice" (Hayhoe 1996).

Prior to recent and ongoing economic reforms, China was dominated by a planned economy. "Key components of the system were a highly centralized mode of command planning, a hierarchical enterprise management system, and elaborate structure of individual material incentives in industry" (Riskin, 1987). High-level centralization and control filtered through every aspect of society, including resource allocation, pricing, and distribution. The consequences of this high-level centralization were serious, including increasingly centralized governmental power on the one hand, and a widespread belief in egalitarianism on the other (Child, 1994).

Centralized planning and control had two main negative consequences for learning. First, people's creativity and learning capabilities were constrained, much as they had been in prior feudal societies. Second, the "three old irons," i.e. "iron rice bowl" (lifetime employment), "iron wages" (centrally administered wages), and "iron chair" (state-controlled appointment and promotion of managerial staff) – the products and processes of centralization and egalitarianism – reduced people's focus on generative learning because they felt comfortable and safe under the "three old irons" system (Ding & Warner, 2001). This situation could be said to resemble Senge's (1990) parable of "the boiled frog."

High levels of state control had also led to an absence of intellectual freedom. Policy aims for education were targeted at teaching style and program content

(Turner & Acker, 2002). "The purpose of the education process in this compounded environment then is to develop individuals who are models of certain kinds of behavior or who develop professional or intellectual knowledge with specific uses in society" (Turner & Acker, 2002). The subsequent impact on teaching and learning was that learning became interpreted as finding the "right" answer and developing one's self into the "right" kind of person along clear and definable lines. The process of skills development, where critical thought and opportunities to develop across a self-determined and independently articulated path, were largely absent in Chinese educational traditions. Curricula focused on a narrow range of highly conforming and unified expectations of teachers and learners (Li 1994; State Education Commission 1996).

After Mao's death in 1976, the intention to undertake economic structural reform was announced at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee meeting of the Communist Party of China, held in December 1978. It was both an immediate reaction to the shortcomings of the Cultural Revolution and a desire to transcend the limitations of the centralized system (Child, 1994). This program of reform, interacting with inherited structural, behavioral, and cultural characteristics, has since shaped the present pattern of enterprise management in China. It was acknowledged in the Plenum that the heavily centralized administrative approach confused the functions of government and enterprise by imposing undue uniformity, and by suppressing initiative, thereby failing to adapt to market demand. Moreover, the opening of economic relations to the outside world (the so-called "open-door policy") was seen as a further necessary change to promote the same objective (Huang, 1985). The essence of the economical reform has been a restructured relationship between government, especially at the central level, and economic units that have been transformed from factories into enterprises. These enterprises must now cope within a global economy.

The economic reformers were aware that changes to China's system of industrial governance were not enough to ensure successful cultural change. Another significant reform was the "emancipation of minds" rally cry, which was often accompanied by the slogan, "seeking truth from facts" (Xinhuanews, 1998). The goal of emancipating the minds of the Chinese people was intended to accelerate economic and cultural development. Emancipating the mind and seeking the truth from facts set a milestone in Chinese people's lives that revived their age-old interest in and respect for learning.

In 1998, Jiang Zemin, then President of China, pointed out that over the previous two decades of reform people had made tremendous achievements through emancipating their minds and seeking truth from facts, and hence were attracting worldwide attention. More recently, in the report of the 16th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, which was held in November 2002, Jiang stated, "We must be good at both reviewing our useful experience and learning lessons from our mistakes….A learning society in which all the people will learn or even pursue lifelong education will emerge to boost their all-round development" (Z. Jiang, 2002). Additionally, "constructing the systems of country-wide and lifelong education, and building the learning society," was also proposed in the Third Plenum of the 16th Central Committee meeting by Hu Jintao, General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee (Peopledaily, 2003). These indicate that the Chinese are ready to embrace all-around learning – at personal, organizational, and societal levels. Learning is once again viewed as involving "study" and "practice," but in new forms, many of which are embedded in and associated with the phenomenon of the learning organization.

The "Learning Organization" comes to China

The concept of the learning organization was introduced in China early in the current economic reforms. In 1980, Tongyi Yang, a professor at Fudan University and alumnus of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), heard about the development of systems dynamics by J. Forrester at his 50th MIT class reunion. Anticipating that these theories could be useful for Chinese management in the process of

economic reform, he introduced systems theory and other related ideas in China by creating two "Forrester – Yang, Tongyi" reading rooms at Shanghai Transportation University and Fudan University. Tongyi Yang also gave lectures in Taiwan to introduce these theories.

A decade later, in October 1992, the "Shanghai International Adult Education Seminar" featured international scholars sharing the development of learning organization theories from around the world, providing fresh perspectives to Chinese scholars and organizations (Zhou et al., 1997). However, the concept of the learning organization did not become widespread in China until a Chinese version of Peter Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline*, was published in 1994. Since then, more and more Chinese people have been attracted to the study and practice of the learning organization principles. Table 1 shows some key learning organization events in China since the translation of *The Fifth Discipline*.

By the time Senge first visited in 2002, the concept of building learning organizations had been spreading throughout China for eight years. The Chinese had accumulated a lot of ideas and experience, as well as some confusion, which needed to be shared and discussed with international experts. The Management Learning and Research Centre of Renmin University, one of the core participants in The First International Forum on Learning Organization (China), invited Senge and other experts from SoL to China to share their experiences in person (Ren, 2003). Meanwhile, Dr. Senge had an interest in China, having studied Chinese culture for more than 20 years. Indeed, some of the basic thinking in his books is deeply influenced by Eastern culture. Ren (2003) recalled the experience of inviting Peter Senge to China in 2001: "Senge accepted our invitation and he told us that he has observed China for quite a while to see whether it is a good soil for the seed of learning organization. He is attracted by China's increasing development. He wishes to contribute to China's development and to learn from Chinese people as well." (2003)

In 2002, Dr. Senge and five other SoL members came to China to give presentations at The 1st International Forum on Learning Organizations (China). More than one thousand people participated in this forum. The Chinese people were inspired by not only their outstanding speeches but also their modesty and passionate beliefs. This forum provided an opportunity for both Chinese and their visitors to learn from each other. Participating Chinese people gained a deeper understanding of Senge's notion of the learning organization, and the Western visitors found that a number of Chinese consultants and organizations had already accumulated a lot of experience that they could share. The purpose of this forum – to facilitate the communication between China and other countries and accelerate the building of learning organizations – was achieved (Ren, 2003).

The rapid and rising interest in the learning organization has spawned numerous articles and books on the topic. The literature can be predominantly categorized into two groups: one contains articles and books translated from the West, and the other features articles and books written by Chinese people to explain or build on Western theories. A few studies feature the characteristics of organizational learning in Mainland China and Hong Kong. For example, Qiu's (1988) Master's degree thesis, *Going Towards the Learning Organization*, analyzes the barriers to and architecture of building a learning organization and is one of the leading early studies on organizational learning in China. Qiu's key conceptual device is an "organizational learning fish model," (see Figure 1) which is an adaptation of Senge et al.'s architecture of the learning organization, the famous Buddhist Master Nan Hui Jin's power of Buddha model (observing, correcting, acting) and Marquardt's (1996) Organization Learning System.

According to Qiu (1998), creating a learning organization is a systems project. It needs "Guiding Ideas," "Mechanisms of Organizational Learning," "Factors that facilitate and enable OL," and "Actions." These are based on the factors in Senge's (1994) architecture of learning organizations and other experts' wisdom. But Qiu puts these components into a living organism, namely a fish. Moreover, he reminds us that creating

Table 1: Key Learning Organization Events in China	
Date	**Event**
1990	Mr. Yang Tongyi introduced and promoted the Systems Dynamic theory in China
1992	Mr. Yang Shuoying promoted Organisational Learning by establishing a Systems Thinking and Organisational Learning Lab in Zhong Shan University in Taiwan
1993	*The Fifth Discipline* was published in traditional Chinese version in Taiwan
1994	*The Fifth Discipline* was published in simplified Chinese version in China
Sept. 1995	The first "learning organization" seminar conducted by TaijiHonda Management and Training Co., Ltd. in Beijing
Oct. 1995	Professor Yang (from Taiwan) interviewed in Science Daily: "Having found the way, don't be scared of how far it is."
April–Aug. 1996	Taiji Honda Management and Training Co., Ltd. published 17 articles in Science Daily introducing Peter Senge's learning organization theory and five disciplines
June 1996	The learning organization Study Group begins in Shanghai
1997	The vision statement of "Building Shanghai to be a learning city to adapt the new era" is first proposed
1997	"The Learning Organization" column was created in the journal of Modern Organizational Education
Jan. 1998	First Shanghai Learning organization Academic Workshop
April 1998	The Learning Company Workshop conducted by the Consulting Centre of State Economy and Trade Committee of China
1998	China Society of Learning Organization, a not-for-profit Internet-based institute established by Mr. Qiu
Sept. 1999	Newspaper aimed at diffusing learning organization theory started by the Central School of Chinese Communist Party.
Oct. 2000	The 1st Forum of the China learning organization in the 21st Century held in Hangzhou
May 2001	Jiang, Zemin presented on "instructing the lifelong education system and creating the learning society" at the APC Human Resource Conference
Oct. 2001	The 1st Conference on learning organization was held in Beijing
Nov. 2001	Chinese version of *The Dance of Change* (Senge et al., 1999) was published in China
May 2002	The 2nd Conference on learning organization held in Beijing
June 2002	The Workshop on Creating Learning Cities held in Dalian
Feb. 2002	Chinese Society of Organizational Learning (SoL) website *www.solchina.org* created by Dr. Wu
Sept. 2002	The 1st International Forum on learning organization (China) was held in Beijing, with Peter Senge and other experts in SoL
Sept. 2002	Chinese version of *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (Senge et al, 1994) published
Jan. 2003	Vision Century, an institute composed of consultants and scholars interested in facilitating learning organizations in China, founded
June 2003	Dr. Wu represents China at the 1st Global Organizational Learning Conference in Finland
Nov. 2003	The 2nd International Forum on learning organization (China) held in Kunming, with Dr. Senge and other SoL experts returning
Nov. 2003	Executive Champion Workshop facilitated by Dr. Senge, as part of 1st International Forum on learning organization (China) held, with Dr. Senge and others from Society for Organizational Learning (SoL)
Sept. 2004	400 participants from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore met in the 8th LO forum in Singapore
Oct. 2004	The 13th Government, Business and Scholar Talkfest was held in Beijing. Mr. Senge joined
Nov. 2004	Mr. Qiu pointed LO conformity system in the 1st LO Advanced Theory and Trend Conference in Beijing
Sept. 2005	More than 20 participants from China and Taiwan participated in the 2nd Global Forum of SoL
Nov. 2005	The 3rd ECW was held in Hefei, China. It was organised by JAC and Mr. Senge facilitated it. Then Mr. Senge went to Beijing, Shanghai and other cities in China to promote Sustainable Development with Chinese Universities

a learning organization requires interacting with the environment, like the fish and the water surrounding it. In Qiu's opinion, to accomplish the task of building the learning organization, all parts of the fish must work together.

First, the guiding ideas root in the head of the fish, starting with the vision, value, and purpose of the organization. They are what the members in the organization seek to create.

Second, the body of the fish is the mechanism of organizational learning, composed of the organizational learning theory, methods, and tools. In the mechanism there are three levels of learning: personal, team, and organizational.

Third, the fins of the fish are factors that facilitate and enable organizational learning, involving some sub-systems, such as organization, knowledge, personnel, and technology. They are the means through which an organization supports people in their work.

Fourth, the tail of the fish initiates the action to create a learning organization. Creating a learning organization is a long process which needs strong desire, a proper starting point, and firm actions.

Finally, like the fish unable to live without water, the learning organization needs to interact with the business environment as well. A learning organization is just like this fish, every part is important and should join forces with other parts.

As Qiu's work suggests, adopting the learning organization model may require new metaphors and illustrations to make it meaningful to new audiences. Since "learning" and "organizations" are socially constructed (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1976; Giddens, 1984), their reconstruction should be expected and welcomed in new social contexts.

Any organizational or management innovation is often a combination of old principles and new thinking. Many such innovations are highly portable from one culture to another on both grounds; they are based on universal principles and novelty – i.e., learning is a common feature of most societies, and a "new" idea can be attractive just because it is new and different. In coming to China, the learning organization found resonance in a culture that has always valued learning and a holistic perspective on the world. The "new" thinking about the importance of learning within organizational, as opposed to school, settings caught on quickly in China, as organizations faced the most radically accelerated growth and innovation environment they had ever experienced.

Our Research

Given the escalating interest in the topic and its West-to-East migration, we were curious to understand how Chinese managers, trainers, consultants, and organizations translated into practice the principles of the learning organization in the Chinese context. Data was gathered by a native Chinese researcher conducting field research for a Master's degree at the University of Auckland Business School in New Zealand. Study participants were selected to include a) both non-Chinese and Chinese individuals, and b) both internal and external change agents (Merriam & Clark, 1991). The main case was a Chinese organization that had committed itself to building a learning organization. For more details on the research methods used and the

Figure 1: The Organizational Learning Fish

Mechanism of Organizational Learning

Guiding Ideas

Actions

Factors that facilitate and enable Organizational Learning
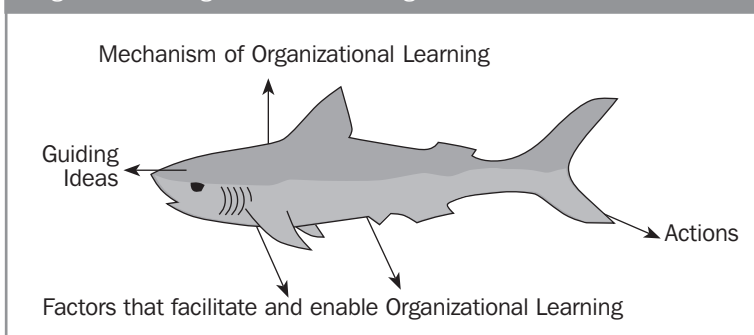
Source: Adapted from Qiu (1998), p.62

field study, see Jiang (2004). The original case study has been recently updated by one of the authors, who has returned to work in China.

Spreading the Word

Chinese institutes and educators have applied several approaches to disseminating information and facilitating the development of learning organizations. The main methods include publishing books and articles, conducting seminars, workshops, and, conferences, and providing consulting services.

Study participants universally regarded books as a means to enlighten people about the general idea of what the learning organization is. Since the first appearance of a Chinese translation of Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* in 1994, approximately one hundred other books related to the learning organization have been published in China. These include, in addition to the Chinese versions of Senge and his colleagues' learning organization series, other translated books as well as many books written by Chinese authors.

Chinese institutes and consultants have made great efforts to organize seminars, workshops, and conferences to introduce learning organization theories and share experiences of the learning organization in practice. Some noteworthy examples of ongoing seminars include those sponsored by the Beijing TaijiHongda Management and Training Company, which has held monthly "advanced investigation" seminars since December 1996. By the end of 2003, several thousand people, including consultants, trainers, and organizational managers had attended these seminars. The same organization also visits organizations throughout China to give field training courses to managers and employees. Another example is the Shanghai Mingde Learning Organization Institute, which since 1996 has organized over 2,100 seminars across 20 provinces in China in cooperation with the Shanghai Education Community, including Shanghai Tongji University, sharing the learning organization theory with over 160,000 people and more than 1,000 enterprises.

Executive Champion Workshops (ECWs), organized and offered by SoL, are also having an impact

in China. The first ECW, facilitated by Peter Senge, was conducted in December 2003 in Kuming. Senge shared his experiences of creating learning organizations around the world and discussed the key issues people might encounter when attempting to create learning organizations in China. Twenty-six organizational executives and managers from celebrated Chinese companies and several government officials participated in this event. Like their Western counterparts, interested members of Chinese organizations often suggest that while the notion of organizational learning is attractive and inspirational, most struggle with how to start the journey. Some participants hope to get the "right answers" from Dr. Senge and other foreign experts regarded as having absolute knowledge and truth on the subject.

Another concern shared by many workshop participants is that after more than two decades of reform, the influence of China's highly centralized government still remains. Building learning organizations in China depends on establishing democratic and harmonious organizational cultures in which individuals can air their views and foster dialogue, but these values are still difficult to enact in organizations with a history of constrained independence. Conference attendees and interviewees also suggested that reviewing the role of leadership is vital when creating learning organizations anywhere, but especially in China.

Issues concerning further government reform are often mentioned as obstacles to further development of organizational learning. Participants, both enterprise managers and government officials, agree that building the "learning government" is a critical theme for developing contemporary China. It is generally felt that the government should be more accessible, open-minded, and embrace innovation more if it wants to set an example of learning for Chinese society.

The power of these learning organization events is not simply that participants gain a better understanding about the concepts and philosophy of organizational learning, but that participants also act as diffusers of learning organization theories. Some act to a certain degree as preachers of the "gospel" of learning, feeling a passionate responsibility to help all Chinese

organizations become learning organizations. Indeed, for some interviewees, spreading the word about this new form of organization was seen as a new lifelong career. The rewards for this vocation are seeing organizations succeed in dealing with conflicts, building shared visions, and understanding more clearly the complex systems necessary for growth and development for the future.

Case Study: Creating a Learning Organization in JAC

Anhui Jianghuai Automotive Group Company, Ltd. (JAC), located in Hefei in Anhui Province, came into existence in 1999 and currently employs 3,700 people. Its predecessor was Hefei Automotive Factory, established in 1964. By 1990, its annual yield was fewer than 1,000 motor vehicles. In the last 10 years, JAC has turned the table from deficit to surplus. JAC develops, manufactures, and sells automobiles, producing 120,000 motor vehicles in 2003. Besides the Chinese market, JAC has moved into exporting to Argentina, Turkey, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and southeast Asia countries. Prior to the learning organization initiative, the company won a variety of industry awards for excellence and growth.

Learning events seem commonplace at JAC. These include activities like a labor competition to see which team's skill and competence was superior, managers' group discussions, and a "blue plate" lunch meeting where a diverse range of organizational members gather to discuss ideas and issues. The name comes from the fact that, at lunchtime, twelve blue plates are randomly inserted among the normal stainless steal plates. The employees who take the blue plates then have the opportunity to sit at a special table with one or two senior JAC managers. They have lunch with the randomly selected employees and hear the employees' opinions.

During the labor competition it became clear that workers have a serious and dedicated attitude in developing their competencies. A harmonious atmosphere and relationship exists between managers and workers, which seems based on high levels of care and trust. Other management meetings observed are part of JAC's feedback system, which provides opportunities for managers in different plants and departments to communicate, exchange feedback, and share opinions. These meetings are called "wall-breaking meetings," which means that the communications between plants and departments are breaking down boundaries. Sometimes these meetings are used to conduct seminars on special topics. In recent years, many experts, from within and outside China, have been invited to give presentations or conduct seminars in these meetings. At JAC, good questions are more important than good answers. Good answers sometimes restrict further thinking, whereas good questions encourage thinking and reflecting.

The development of JAC has been termed the "JAC Phenomenon" in the Chinese automotive industry. Our interviewees attributed the success of JAC to ongoing innovations in technology, management, and a learning environment. The increasingly volatile business environment inside and outside of China meant that JAC had to think about how to sustain the company's viability. But this process takes time.

In 1996 managers of JAC were introduced to Senge's work, which seemed a suitable remedy for their situation. They had already been doing something similar to the suggestions in his book, but they did not know the term "learning organization." *The Fifth Discipline* expanded their thinking on the possibilities for organizational reform. They came to view systems thinking and team learning as core concepts of their organizational culture, introduced to every employee joining the company. Mr. Zuo summed it up by saying, "If we are said to have a recipe for developing well, it is that we are constantly building JAC into a learning organization."

At an individual level, JAC policies encourage every employee to learn. They provide full-scale training programs, and more importantly, an environment allowing employees to communicate. The leaders of JAC endeavor to invest in training and learning in the company. Their training center has become "JAC University." The facilities and equipment in the training center are some of the most advanced in the company. In JAC there is a common understanding

of the learning organization in these terms: "One definition, two characteristics, and three systems." The *one definition* that JAC gives to the learning organization is: "An organization that keeps on learning to create its own future. In this organization, everyone perceives the meaning of life from their daily work." The *two key characteristics* of a learning organization are "the spirit of constant self-criticism" and "a clear common value." The *three systems* underpinning this are reflection, feedback, and sharing systems.

Almost every JAC plant has a "learning corner," separated from work areas by several whiteboards, on which learning logs and diagrams are pasted. These learning logs are written by the workers to share their learning experiences. Introductions to new books are also pasted on the board. Learning corners were created to enable the workers to have conversations at break times. Besides the learning corners in the plants, there is a large common read-ing room in JAC. The Reader Committee holds regular events, such as reader report meetings and speech competitions.

While JAC's reflection and feedback systems seemed quite similar to Western models, its sharing system included several novel approaches, such as creating reader committees, and sharing experiences with other companies. Storytelling was regarded as a simple but effective way for JAC people to share opinions and ultimately to build shared values, as stories are easily understood and accepted, but also can express values well (Snowden, 2000, 2001; Kolb, 2002, 2003). There were several popular stories used to illustrate key values. For instance, the "boiled frog" story from *The Fifth Discipline* is used to teach people that serious challenges may be hidden behind an apparent calm state. Everyone in JAC is apparently familiar with this and other stories, making them increasingly a part of the organization's culture.

The first step toward building a learning organization is often considered to be developing a shared vision. The vision of JAC is "providing better products for a better tomorrow." These words are written in gold plate on a big stone board in the lobby of the main JAC building. It also appears to have been engraved in JAC people's minds. In the group discussion one manager presented his feelings: "We are inspired by the vision because we feel that the meaning of our work is not only work for life, but also work for creating the future." Developing a shared vision in JAC was a bi-directional process. As one of the Organizational Development specialists described it, "Firstly, the team visions were created by combining everyone's personal visions, then the teams' visions were pooled to create the vision of departments, and then the company's vision was formed by abstracting the departments' visions. Secondly, when the initial vision of the company emerged, there was a top-down discussion with departments and teams to check whether the meaning had been captured correctly. Consequently, JAC's vision illustrates what we want and it is the common desire of all employees." Achieving employees' personal vision contributes to achieving JAC's shared vision.

To build a learning organization, JAC went through three stages. The first stage (1996–1998) involved setting up a learning organization project team, which linked Learning Organization theories to the core values of the company, including new perspectives on human resources and new conceptualizations of learning itself. In the second stage (1998–2002), they started the "40+4" program, which means that besides the 40 hours of working time per week, everyone in JAC was encouraged to commit an extra four hours to training every Sunday morning. This program led to a learning environment where everyone is involved. It also helped develop a training system for employees at different levels. At this stage, JAC introduced training in moral character development and built systems for reflection, feedback, and sharing. Based on the belief that learning is a necessary lifelong activity, learning and training were viewed as investments rather than

costs. JAC people believed learning should stem from the heart, and that "the more you want, the more you will learn." Therefore, JAC trained employees "to do work by heart rather than by hand." The third stage (2002-present) is related to employees' career development, creating a learning organization network and transforming the quality control team into a learning team. Six learning labs have been built to resolve problems arising in daily work. Overall, quality improvement is now 'owned' by staff, instead of being 'managed' by control systems.

Based on systems thinking, JAC is creating ecological links with its providers, distributors, and customers. In order to provide high quality products to customers, the responsibility for quality cannot rest solely with the manufacturer. High-quality materials from providers and high-quality sales and service delivered by the distributors to customers all play an important role in the success of JAC and its business ecology partners. Previously, distributors in different provinces competed with each other on price. Now they see the connections between supplier, manufacturer, distributor, and customer.

Organizational learning at JAC can be broken into four types: 1) learning from practice, 2) learning by pooling the wisdom and efforts of every employee, 3) learning by improvement, and 4) benchmarking with others. JAC benchmarks itself against its role models in the automobile industry all around the world. At the same time, JAC shares its ideas and systems for developing and sustaining a learning organization with other organizations. This helps develop a framework for organizational learning in China and supports the economic and social development of China. JAC's rapid development has attracted attention from government, in particular the ministry of education. The government of Hefei Province and surrounding provinces send representatives to visit JAC to learn how to create a better learning environment in the their society, in particular building links between formal education and lifelong learning. In 2005, Vice General Manager of JAC, Ms. Kong introduced JAC's experience at the SoL annual conference in Vienna.

When asked about the successes and failures in creating a learning organization, Mr. Zuo said that it was still too early to say. They are on the way. There is a saying in China when describing economic reform, which is "fishing for the road." It is likewise for building learning organizations in China; time will be the judge. Although, more and more positive feedback comes out, we need to pay attention to the phenomena that some organizations merely use "Learning Organization" as a slogan, or decorate all their activities with "Organizational Learning" but miss the true learning in their organizations. When employees in JAC were asked what is learning organization, they replied, "It is what we are doing every day."

Discussion

Having described how the learning organization concept made its way to China, how the concept is being translated and promoted in workshops and seminars, and how it is being implemented within one Chinese organization, we might consider the themes inherent in the learning organization movement in China, and how these messages fit traditional and contemporary socio-cultural contexts. These themes include: learning as imperative, the learning organization as template for strategic success, learning as consistent with Chinese philosophy, the connection between learning and leading, and learning as pathway for socio-economic sustainability.

Learning as Imperative

China is now moving at full steam towards a market economy. The economic reform arising in China is a pioneering work without parallel in history. Critical issues include enterprise reorganization, restructuring, and reengineering for success, and increased skill shortages. Solving these problems requires unprecedented innovation and a mind shift for Chinese organizations toward embracing continual learning and practice. These developments lead to the demand for knowledge and practical theories for managing organizations in China. Organizations in China must learn faster and adapt to the rapid change in the

global environment. "Learning inside the organization must be equal to or greater than change outside the organization or the organization will not survive. . . . Within the next 10 years only learning organizations will survive" (Schwandt & Marquardt, 2000). To be competitive in the world, China needs to learn at least as quickly, if not faster than, other countries.

When asked, most participants started their interpretations of the "learning organization" by describing the term "learning" as imperative for organizational success. Most comments fell into the common themes of Senge and other Western authors' works, regarding the capacity to learn as the hallmark of effective organizations of the future. One aspect of learning agreed to by all participants was Senge's notion of fields of practice. This is the idea that although human beings learn from trial and error, our learning ability is often restricted by our fear of making mistakes. In organizations, the cost of mistakes can be huge, but mistakes cannot be avoided, and can in fact become a rich source of collective learning.

One organizational vision of JAC is to see itself as a "school." This is intended to be a provocative metaphor, since traditionally the Chinese tend to think of learning and work separately. You learn when you are young. After graduating with a certain degree, you go to work and your learning life is finished. However, as JAC illustrates, learning and work can be integrated. The comprehensive training system in JAC attempts to redefine the notion of learning within a work environment with the aim of providing training to a wide range of employees at every level in the company. There has been a transition from the traditional, one-way indoctrination to open, interactive learning. The trainers' role is more like a coach or host than a teacher. Their job is facilitating two-way learning through discussion and dialogue, bringing new energy to the learning process.

The management method in the industrial economy – control – is no longer the most effective method in knowledge and innovation-based economies. Instead, respecting humanity and supporting human inquiry is becoming more appropriate, if not necessary, for organizational survival. This shift is the first

step in becoming a learning organization. The acceptance of the notion of learning organizations in China is not accidental, and may be considered inevitable for those concerned with economic survival and prosperity.

Organizational Learning as a Template for Strategic Success

Participants at learning events frequently referred to becoming a learning organization as a template of strategic success for organizations in general (Larson, 1991; Senge, 1990), and this strategic formula could be applied to Chinese organizations. This could be especially important for organizations whose massive upheavals in the rapidly changing environment produce high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity. With many landmarks of the competitive environment disappearing or changing, the learning organization can serve as a flexible, yet structured, generic strategy or "map" for firms facing highly uncertain terrain (Weick, 1995, 1996). The learning disciplines and systems thinking provide organizations with sufficient structure and tools to pursue the dreams of competitiveness and long life. To become a learning organization can be equated with being on the way to the future. Some of those interviewed, for example, Mr. Liu, was adamant that "being a learning organization is not a trend but a way people think about learning, relate to each other and connect to their organization."

Most economic indicators suggest that China will continue to be a major competitive force in the twenty-first century (Li, Tsui, & Weldon, 2000). While China's development in the last 20 years has contributed to a significant surge of reforms and modernization, the country still faces a number of economic challenges, both internal and external. With its acceptance into the World Trade Organization, China has entered a new stage in its opening up by going out onto the world business platform. China faces numerous challenges from outside as well. These include competition in the global market, the force of international business rules, and the influence of the foreign culture and ideology. To address these challenges, focusing only on re-engineering or re-invention is not enough. Propelled by the competitive pressures for speed, global responsiveness, and innovation, learning may become the only viable alternative to organizational extinction.

Notable progress has been made in improving democracy in China. Compared with the planned economy period, Chinese culture has become increasingly rich and colorful, and Chinese people's minds are more open; they are keen to learn more than ever before. To obtain and sustain competitive advantage in the new environment, Chinese organizations should learn better and faster from their success and failures. They need to continuously transform themselves in order to reach a point where groups and individuals reliably engage in new processes. Because of China's unique socio-economic-political context, organizational learning seems to be more necessary in China than in other countries.

Organizational Learning as Consistent with Chinese Philosophy

One of the reasons China welcomes learning organizations is that their characteristics have much in common with Chinese traditional culture. Both emphasize that people are the center of the world. Traditional Chinese culture is chiefly characterized by a people orientation that is also the essence of learning organizations. A second commonality of the learning organization and traditional culture, as described above, is the emphasis on learning and practice. Learning is the core theme in the learning organization, and it is also the essence of traditional Chinese culture. There is a humane versus instrumental ideal in traditional Chinese culture, insisting on developing people rather than utilizing them like tools. The learning organization and traditional Chinese culture, of course, share this view. The fourth commonality is insisting on cooperation. The learning organization values team learning and suggests that the key to improving an organization's competitiveness is effective team learning (Senge, 1990). Traditional Chinese culture incorporates a similar concept. Individuals are viewed as the components of the group,

to which they should contribute their intelligence and capabilities, with a strong emphasis on collectivism as opposed to individualism. Finally, traditional Chinese culture and the concept of the learning organization merge at the common point of respecting nature and embracing the whole system. Learning organization scholars often criticize the industrial revolution for separating the world into fragments, which subsequently produced the division of work, which eventually manifests itself in a fragmented worldview. In Eastern thought, people are an integral part of the natural world (Senge, 2002). The traditional Chinese culture sees the individual as an integral part of nature. Reliance on others is necessary because individuals are already part of the same whole.

Most participants in our study indicated that they perceived something in Senge's work that was resonant with their own personal belief systems. They saw the learning organization as a self-motivated organization that is continually self-molding. Development within the learning organization is not forced by others, but rather is primarily self-initiated, though it may also be united by shared vision. Individuals within organizations must be self-motivated and open to changing themselves, rather than being organized or changed by others. This, of course, is challenging for any organization, but particularly for traditional Chinese organizations, which along with enlightened views, also embody a centralized hierarchy and large numbers of passive followers.

Training to develop good moral character is a vital element of the training programs like those in JAC. Moral character is regarded as the most important characteristic for Chinese people. According to one interviewee, good moral character is central for a human being, and even more important for a team member in the organization. What JAC requires from employees is "learning to be a human being before learning to work." When walking around the plants and departments in JAC, slogans on good moral character were evident, hanging on walls and pinned to notice boards. But these were not just "decorations." When asked how they felt about the
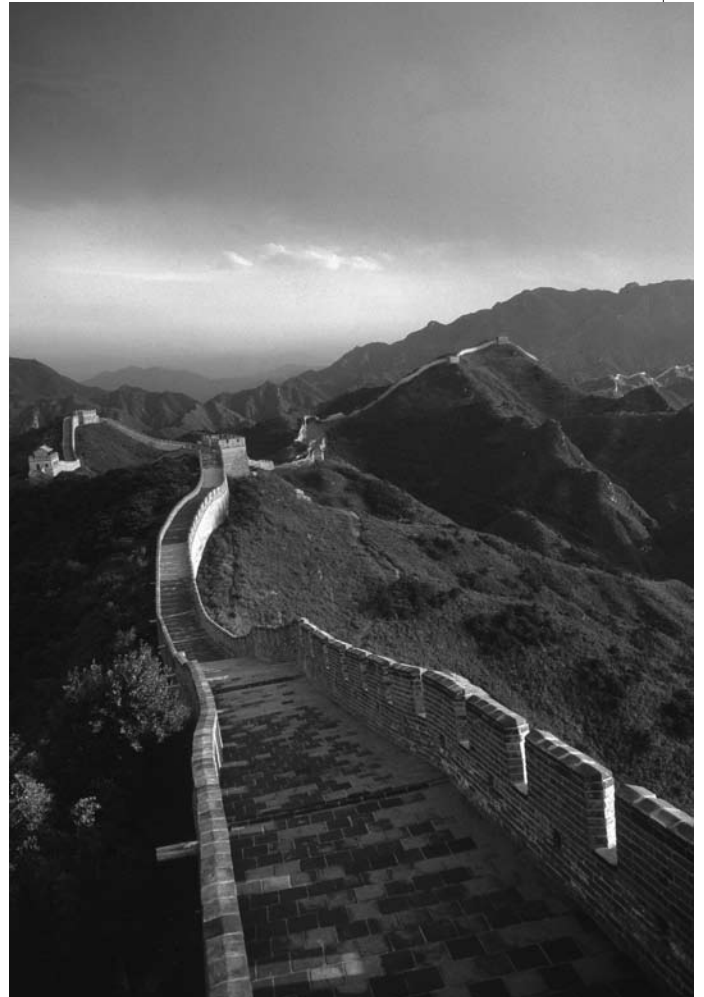
statement of "moral character first," those workers almost all gave the same answer, namely that they believe good moral character generates trust between people, which is the foundation for collaboration. Good collaboration leads to high-quality teamwork, which further results in good products and benefits, and success.

Chinese philosophy and traditional culture, however, may not be so distant from the West. Close inspection reveals that the two ways of thinking are perhaps more closely related than they were once believed to be. Those from both Eastern and Western cultural traditions seem attracted to Senge's championship of human values in the workplace, to his views that individual learning is the basis of organizational learning, and to his insistence that leadership is something that occurs at many levels in an organization, not just in the executive suite.

Learning Fosters Creative Leadership

According to many participants in our study, the leadership fostered in the learning organization must be creative and sensitive to change and innovation. These characteristics are significant for Chinese organizations, as some leaders and managers in Chinese state-owned organizations were appointed by the government and often lack the courage or training to face organizational changes.

Employees must be given the opportunities to know what is going on, to think constructively, and to be allowed to explore new ways to solve problems. Ultimately, if successful, Chinese organizations might obtain a goal of leadership espoused by Lao Tzu (1998), whereby "through the action-less activity all things are duly regulated" and where the best leader is the one whose followers say, "we did this ourselves."

Learning for Sustainability

Learning organization approaches raise awareness that the industrial system is not separate from nature. This awareness has also caused grief for human beings and other living things. Building learning organizations is the call from the knowledge economy. According to Senge, "the evolution of industrial society led to material wealth for the majority, increasingly shifting people's orientation toward work" (1990). People yearn to build organizations "that are more consistent with their higher aspirations, beyond food, shelter and belonging."

Some participants articulated that as a template of future successful organizations in China, learning organizations must pay attention to sustainable development. In an increasingly profit-oriented business world, costs can be the destruction of the environment and a widening gap between the rich and poor. The rapid changes in China's economy have meant that, unfortunately, much of this development is not sustainable in the long run. This issue is often cited in the international press, but those inside China also recognize it as a key issue. In 2002, the 16th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party stated that China must give special prominence to sustainable development and stick to the basic policies of family planning, environment protection, and resource preservation. The concept of sustainable development was proposed more recently at the SoL annual conference. Given that sustainable development requires the concept of "development" to be creatively redefined, those developing learning organizations are well placed to address social and environmental concerns, since learning organizations foster care about others' benefit as well as their own profitability and wealth. Learning organizations, which pay attention to sustainable development, can play an important role by setting examples for other Chinese organizations. If more Chinese organizations took steps toward sustainable development, the future of China would be considerably more promising.

Mr. Zuo explained how he sees JAC's vision fitting into the broader social context. He believes that the development of society was a consequence of everyone's contributions and that the basic purpose of an organization should be to provide values for the society. The development of an organization was based on the support of society and concerns from customers. Therefore, organizations should respond to society and take responsibility for flourishing in the world. These were his interpretations of JAC's shared vision to provide the better products for a better future for society.

JAC employees have begun to enact socially responsible aspects of their corporate vision. Besides their provision of a series of high quality products to customers, they also contribute to society through other activities, such as donating money to protect forests and endowments to the "Hope Primary Schools." During its recent development and expansion, JAC merged several poorly performing companies. In the process of merging, JAC revived not only the companies but also the prospects of the employees within those companies. JAC's development has also provided employment opportunities to the people in surrounding areas. These were important contributions to society, especially in the current situation of increasing unemployment in China.

JAC has also made contributions to environment protection. In 1998 JAC started to remove excess packaging from their products. They deliver their products with recycled industrial material instead of using one-off plastic and wooden boxes. Seven years on, JAC has saved resources and contributed to environment protection. These activities won JAC the admiration and respect of the people, not only in Hefei but also in the surrounding Anhui province.

Challenges Facing Learning Organizations in China

If the learning organization is, as it is often characterized, a streamlined, flat, boundary-less structure that maximizes contact, information flow, local responsibility, and collaboration within and outside the organization, and, if the centralized and hierarchical structure still exists as the dominant paradigm in Chinese organizations, then the learning organization as an ideal has a long way to go before becoming a reality. The state of human resource management in China is far from ideal. At present, most managers and employees are not well prepared for the demands of the modern competitive economy. The notion of empowering employees as learners to learn, to plan for their future competencies, to take action and risks, and to solve problems has not been extensively embedded in managers' minds. Knowledge systems, which support the acquisition, creation, storage, transfer, and utilization of knowledge, also have great room for improvement. The resources for managing knowledge are neither sufficiently pervasive nor systematic to promote knowledge sharing. And in relation to knowledge and information, most Chinese organizations still hold to conservative rather than creative values.

One consultant interviewed in this study, Mr. Zhang, reported the following problems and challenges in facilitating and practicing learning organizations in China:

> Some people have a misunderstanding about "learning." They regard learning as reading books only.

> Some organizations regard creating the learning organization as against their core business.

> Personal learning is emphasised more than collective learning in many organizations.

> Creating the learning organization is seen as a training function and thereby separated from improving management philosophy, structures, and practices.

> Some organizations only strive to reform their structures and policies rather than shift their mental models.

> Some organizations know that they need to learn but they have no idea how to learn or where to start.

> Learning is regarded as something extra to daily work. The development of work capabilities is neglected.

Qiu found that the phenomenon of learning organizations is becoming too widely applied (what he calls "inundated") and that too many variations lead to confusion (2003). Furthermore, he claims that many scholars and practitioners falsely suggest what the learning organization is and/or whether or not their organizations have achieved such a state. Both of these conditions are obviously challenges for creating "true" learning organizations in China:

> "Inundation" at the theoretical level means that the concept of the learning organization is being expanded too broadly to "knowledge management," "organizational behavior," "human resource management," "social psychology," and "information technology," and is becoming even more extensive. Although, these subjects may enrich the learning organization theory system, the concept of the learning organization may lose its identity. At the practical level, some organizations labelled all organizational activities as "organizational learning."

Furthermore, the "falseness" is also reviewed at both theoretical and practical levels. At the theoretical level, it indicates that the research on learning organizations is superficial and even plagiarises others. At the practical level, some learning organizations have more rhetoric than realities.

By considering the problems and challenges in the process of creating learning organizations in China, a common belief of the participants in this research was that the paths towards the learning organizations are not smooth, but the future is fascinating. Most were nonetheless optimistic, believing that many if not every organization can become a learning organization. Most were committed to doing their best to help their fellow human beings and organizations to achieve the visions they really want.

Chinese Learning Organizations from Foreign Perspectives

The ECW and international forum afforded us a rare opportunity to collect opinions from Peter Senge, Goran Carstedt, and Dennis Sandow, all leaders in the field of the learning organization and key members of SoL. In their interviews, they were asked about their impressions of their visits to China and their views on Chinese learning organizations.

These foreign experts all showed their respect for ancient Chinese wisdom. They believe China has a good background for fostering learning organizations. China has more than five thousand years of history, which address natural science and social science, including Confucius's *The Analects*, Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, and "Tai Chi." These thoughts revealed the nature of knowledge and the nature of learning, which indicated that Chinese people have had a deep understanding of learning for a long time, and that this should be a strong basis for Chinese people to foster learning organizations. Another advantage for China in creating effective learning organizations is that China is less negatively influenced by the Industrial Age.

Recalling his two trips to China, Dr. Senge said, "I feel that Chinese people are very eager to learn and

they have done a lot in practicing learning organizations." Dr. Sandow had visited China twice to conduct a case study of the Ancai Group. Doing research at Ancai gave him an opportunity to learn. He challenged other organizations to join Ancai in expanding a global economy based on social, biological, and financial well-being. He insists that China has good practice and examples in building learning organizations. Similarly, Dr. Carstedt, a key proponent of the Executive Champion Workshop, sees massive scope for learning organizations in China:

> What an overwhelming experience. China, a country of 1.3 billion, has committed itself from top to bottom to move toward a learning society – to transform the country into a learning nation, the party into a learning party, learning cities, and learning organizations. Such a commitment is more than loose talk – it will start an avalanche of initiatives and projects. It is an evolving network, which will engage many more organizations and activities in China and the world. Good luck to "Panda SoL." (*The introduction of Executive Champion Workshop online*)

When asked to compare building learning organizations in China with other countries, Dr. Carstedt replied firmly, "Building learning organizations in China can only be done by the Chinese." "Only Chinese people know how to build learning organizations in China" was a common point in the interviews with SoL experts. At the end of the ECW in Kunming, Dr. Senge stated his expectation of China: "I believe that the methods of China's development will influence the world."

Conclusion

China is at a vital stage of a massive reform. The shift from a planned economy to a market economy represents an unprecedented change in China's economic, political, and cultural systems. The future prosperity and pride of the country is at stake, and

for many this provides a source of seemingly endless motivation. Reforms are opening up markets and modernizing practices, which are inevitably affecting the way things are being done in and around organizations throughout the country.

The speed and urgency of such sweeping organizational changes require organizational members to adapt to this brave new world by revising their worldviews, by understanding how one system affects another, and by sharing their individual insights and understanding with others – in short, they must learn quickly, collectively, and comprehensively, in order to keep up with the changes going on around them. This need for a collective ability to deal with complexity and the ability to adapt to rapid and ongoing socio-economic changes has made the learning organization concept a compelling form of organizational development within China over the past decade.

Though radically different from the traditional emphasis on hierarchy, conformity, and control, the learning organization concept nonetheless fits closely with other traditional facets of Chinese society and culture. These include a deep respect for education and learning, which is often characterized (and has, in recent history, been dominated) by an emphasis on rote learning. This unfortunately masks the fact that a fundamental element in the definition and traditional emphasis of "learning" was placed on "practice," as opposed to abstract learning, separated from day-to-day life. Chinese people also relate to visions of a better future and aspire for their organizations to go beyond commercial success to serve the community and the world as part of a whole, interrelated and dynamic system. Given this background, it is easy to see the connection between China's traditional past and its contemporary interest and commitment to learning in organizational contexts, and therefore to the "learning organization" as a body of best practices, which can help organizations not just survive, but thrive in chaotic times.

The concepts of "organizational learning" and the "learning organization" have been developed by Westerners over several decades. In China, the field is relatively new, only about ten years old. During

that time, many academics, consultants, trainers, and managers have grasped the concept zealously, promoting it far and wide. Several major Chinese organizations have embarked on the road to becoming a learning organization. This article chronicles the introduction of the learning organization to China and provides an overview of the approaches to "spreading the word." It also portrays how Chinese consultants, trainers, and managers have interpreted and translated the learning organization phenome-non into their practice and their organizations. Those participating in the learning organization movement in China see it offering the prospect of organizations that are both human and effective, that are locally cooperative, yet globally competitive, and that promote and develop the best of Chinese culture. The road to becoming a learning organization may be a difficult one to travel, but if the way is known, the destination is never far.

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Commentary
By C. Will Zhang
Coordinator, SoL China Project

C. Will Zhang

The Chinese dragon has powerful jaws and claws on a soft, invisibly winged body, and big bright eyes that shine through the clouds of the skies: it symbolizes masculine strength with feminine flexibility, and warm-hearted determination with clear-minded broad vision and high aspiration. By nature of its merit as an angel warrior protecting the harmony and spiritual connectivity of human- and heavenly-beings, the dragon should always be alert and never fall asleep.

Somewhere around the 10th century AD, however, the majority Han Chinese started to lose their spiritual balance of the dragon: their mind started to be manifestly weak and body fragmentarily heavy and, by 1840, rigid and self-constrained in a closed courtyard of the Far East. The subsequent bloody psychophysical insults from Western gunboats and Japanese tanks and war planes electrified the numb nerves deep inside the sleeping giant's body and, with imported and often toxic antidotes for a longtime "sleeping disorder" that is still in effect to some degree, China has managed to come back to consciousness and, as Napoleon reportedly rightly prophesized, the whole world is being shaken.

The Kolb-Jiang theme emerges in such a historic-cultural context. Organizational learning may thus be seen as the first, and perhaps also the last, major imported antidote that is surprisingly non-toxic and even congenial to the essence of China's past glory. Before recovering to its full strength and originality in perhaps three to five decades, China today still needs

Western intervention, which must now be combined with native natural remedies, traditional tonics, tai-chi exercises, and even reflective contemplations.

Last November, during the first joint SoL-Peking-and-Tsinghua Reflective Dialogue Seminar with Peter Senge at these top two – often rival – universities, C.S. Kiang, Dean of the College of Environmental Sciences at Peking University, talked about the need for organizational learning or, rather, "organized learning" – a community learning that produces synergy among different organizations. China needs organized learning that transcends and integrates the boundaries of organizations, academic and otherwise, which are mostly modeled after industrial-age inventions that tend to encounter failure when attempting systemic innovations needed for resolving the current unsustainable and disharmonious reality with increasingly globally interdependent complexities.

The half-awakened dragon needs organized and *metanoic* learning: a mind shift to its full awareness – of its bodily and spiritual conditions and potentials and its rising duties and responsibilities in the world. This shift has started to happen – and we, as inside outsiders and outside insiders, are privileged to be part of the flow facilitating this historical transformation. In 2004, the prevailing attitude of Chinese companies, including JAC, was to get rich (or out of poverty) first, with existing technologies, before they can care for the environment and invest in sustainable innovations. In 2005, when I visited JAC in August and then in November with the SoL ECW

team, I saw a dramatic shift of mind. They are now thinking of building a circular economy (in which all waste is recycled) and, in particular, developing sustainable mobility, starting with their recently-bought bus manufacturing facility called Ankai, already a top brand coach in China. In conversation, Wang Jiang-An, chairman of the Ankai Co., told me that they wanted to work with multinational and Chinese partners and together strive to develop cleaner urban transportation systems.[1] Wang asked for help with synergy through organized learn-ing across boundaries, amongst potential partners, including the BP-Tsinghua Clean Energy Center and the Chinese Government's Clean Automobile Action Group.

From government to business to academia, the Chinese are finally seriously reviewing their role as potential leaders in building a sustainable and harmonious world. The changeis

profound and fast, fostering reflections on the meaning of leadership: the habitual command-and-control for survival seems outdated, the Chinese must now "take a step forward" toward a new and better world. The instrumental mentality of the Industrial Age must be replaced by a humane purpose: collective human development toward a holistic human-nature empathy, interconnectedness and harmony, which is, as Kolb and Jiang point out, central to the classic Chinese tradition and perhaps also, I would add, essential to a global sustainable future. In this sense, the future of China, and indeed of the world, awaits a grand metanoia of spirit and mind/heart, a great cultural renaissance of the East, and a growing awakening of a global humanistic culture.

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Endnote

1 A new report by Xiong, Liang-Ping (Dec. 2005, "Clean-Energy Urban Transportation Project," Hefei: Technology Center, Anhui Ankai Automobile Co. Ltd.) reveals that hundreds of Ankai natural gas – both CNG and LPG – buses are already running in cities including Beijing, Guangzhou and Chengdu; a few dozen electric and gas-electric hybrid buses are running in Beijing and Zhuzhou; and a new hydrogen/super-capacitor hybrid model is expected to come on-line early next spring.

Commentary

By Zhaoliang Qiu, with Stephen Meng and Glenn Lauder

Zhaoliang Qiu

We hope "Organizational Learning in China" will be the first of many articles in *Reflections* that can give the SoL global learning communities a glimpse of the emerging sustainable organizational learning movement that has been gaining momentum and building critical mass over the past ten years in Mainland China.

In their article, Kolb and Jiang first discussed the differences between Eastern and Western cultures and their influence on the organizational learning (OL) movement. After setting the context, they described in brief the status of the organizational learning movement in China, and uncovered some meta-themes in the learning organization movement in China. In one Chinese case study, they usefully illustrate how some of these themes are illustrated in practice.

We have observed and sensed that just as global capitalism is at a cross-roads, the future of sustainable organizational learning in China faces "six forks" in its road ahead. The current status of China is too complex to define a clear mainstream. Its foundation is traditional eastern thought in which Confucianism's influence is deep and far reaching along with Taoism, and Buddhism. Communism has been a dominant social ideology since the PRC (or "New China") was founded in 1949. In the last 56 years, PRC has experienced many transitions and turbulences. The first of four phases we distinguish are: (1) the centrally controlled planning economy from 1949 to 1966, during which Communism was introduced and became dominant; (2) the Culture Revolution from 1966 to 1976 which turned Chinese traditional culture

upside-down; (3) the Economic Reform and the Open-Door Policy from 1976, a response to the unintended consequences of the Culture Revolution, and most recently, (4) the transformation to a market economy and globalization in the last five years. We see the Chinese society is in a deep transformation, with huge gaps emerging among different regions, industries, and firms. Some are still influenced by the central controlled economy and governance, some are already completely operating in a global and market economy. Kolb and Jiang's case study tends to highlight conditions characteristic of the centrally planned economy.

Two useful opportunities for reflection on Organizational Learning in China have been at the World Café held in the 8th Learning Organization in Action Conference at September, 2004, Singapore and the SoL 2nd Global Sustainability Forum in Vienna in September, 2005. Participants explored the Organizational Learning movement in China as a complex informal network comprised of five driving forces including government, enterprises, consulting firms, media and publishing, and universities and institutes. This framework (inspired by Lan Li, Stephen Meng, Jack Liu and others, and since presented by the authors at SoL's Global Forum in Vienna) points towards the places we could be watching for emerging evidence and examples of sustainable learning organizational practice:

• Government: In January 2004, a nationwide campaign named "Creating Learning Organizations, Being knowledge workers" ("Chuang Zheng" movement in abbreviated) laws aunched. Sponsored by nine central government depart-

ments and Unions and social groups, events included a May 2004 contest in which more than 11 million workers participated.

• Enterprises: Pioneer enterprises exploring an organizational learning approach over the last eight years include as well as JAC, the Laiwu Steel Group, Haier Group, Yanzhou Coal Group, and the Lunan Cement Company. There are likely to be rich lessons from these and other examples, and also a huge challenge in generating the depth of organizational awareness that would enable the firms and their communities and environment to flourish.

• Consulting firms: Consulting firms can be facilitators of the Organizational Learning movement in China. We are not as confident as Kolb and Jiang that there are many emerging local practitioners in China, and can see many opportunities for growing and deepen local capacity.

• Mass Media: Mass media and publishing houses also play a key role at the development of the OL movement in China. Books published in recent years in Mainland China on organizational learning amount to more than 70, which is quite small compared to the size of the potential learning community.

• Universities: Universities and institutes are often the incubators of new ideas. Although there is not a specialized branch in the universities or institutes all around China currently, many individuals within them have had a huge influence to the development of the OL movement in China.

We divide the OL movement in China into two major phases. The first phase ran from the middle of the 1990s to 2001. When the notion of learning organizations was imported into China in the middle of the 1990s, only a few researchers and individuals understood and promoted the

ideas, including Prof. Tongyi Yang (mentioned by Kolb and Jiang), and Dr. Shuoying Yang, a professor of Sun Yat-sen University, Taiwan. Shuoying Yang established the Systems Thinking and Organisational Learning Lab (STOLL), promoted the publishing of a Chinese version of *The Fifth Discipline*, and influenced many people now actively part of the LO movement.

The second phase of organizational learning in China we date from 2001, and it has been growing fast. There are two milestones for this phase: former Chairman Ze-Min Jiang proposal to build "a life-long education system, becoming a Learning Society," the launch of the Chuang Zheng movement.

As observers, we have a keen interest in seeing a sustainable organizational learning movement in China deepen and flourish in China. In the spirit of comprehensive harmony, we see sustained efforts in the following areas might be important:

• Development of innovative practical tools and methods for deepening the process of building learning organizations. An example is the emerging social technology of "presencing," using the Theory of "U" discussed by Senge et al in *Presence*.

• Improve the integration and coordination among the communities in order to facilitate the knowledge diffusion, sharing and innovation.

• Foster the exploratory research for the localization of OL theory in order to make it more practicable for Chinese enterprises. The research will require resources and experiences through international collaboration and integration of real experiences and knowledge gained by local firms.

The future development trajectory of China has huge relevance to the entire world. China faces not only a social, environmental and business

challenge; but a cultural challenge as well. A future in which China will flourish will be one which draws deeply on ancient wisdom as well as a new global wisdom. We see the emerging thought around sustainable organisational learning, including the ideas at the heart of "Presence," as being an approach that can integrate global imperative with Chinese character and traditions. We honour Kolb and Jiang's contribution, and the forum that SOL can provide to an essential emerging dialogue.

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Hindustan Petroleum's Structural Analysis of Current Reality

by Ashis Sen

Ashis Sen

Hindustan Petroleum's Direct Sales Regional Office (DSRO) at Kolkata, located in the state of West Bengal, caters to customers in West Bengal, six states in the northeastern part of India, and Nepal. Area-wise, the state of West Bengal alone is larger than Austria, which means that team members are separated by great distances. The office caters to direct consumers of petroleum products, which are primarily industries and government accounts.

A year ago, we conducted a workshop to help the team build a vision, and then work towards manifesting it. Their analysis of current reality produced a number of structural challenges, which were causally mapped. High leverage areas were identified which would enable the team to progress towards their vision. The causal maps and the team's analysis are detailed below

Current Reality

• Sales officers reported that customers were increasingly demanding higher discounts. It appears, they said, that price is the primary competitive edge in the market. To retain our target business volumes, we have been forced for the last few years to match the prices offered by our competitors. If we don't do that, we can't retain even our long-standing customers. Additionally, when the production of a particular product is higher than the immediate demand, we have to empty refinery tanks quickly, which puts pressure on the sales officers to get orders from new or existing customers quickly. At those times, we need to offer even heavier discounts to new customers. Obviously, our existing customers then demand the same level of discounts as was offered to the new customers.

• However, when sales reached the target/desired levels and there was no pressure from the refinery to evacuate tanks, there was pressure to reduce the discount levels, since discounts adversely affect our bottom-line. This was mapped as follows (Figure 1):

Figure 1
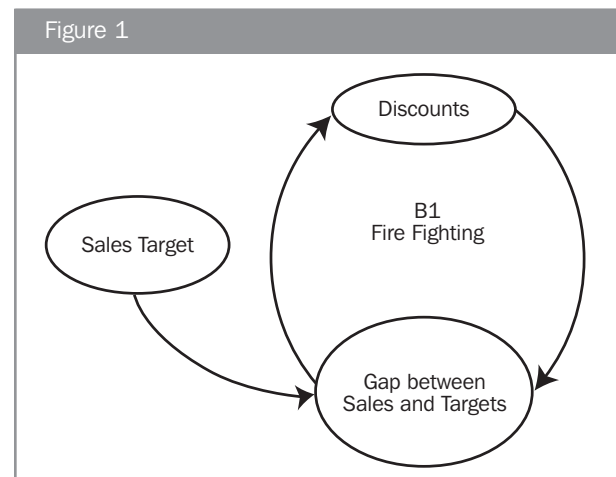
• The problem with discounts is that customers become addicted to them over time, and begin to consider the discounted price as the real price. Further, since in moments of urgency or at times when there is a slump in sales discounts have always come to our rescue, fundamental solutions like providing value added service – offering sound engineer-

ing advice to customers on product selection, carrying out detailed study of their plants to provide customized solutions, or initiatives to improve or develop new products – are often relegated to the back-burner. Due to this, customers continue to demand discounts and a serious addiction loop follows, reducing our ability to implement fundamental solutions (Figure 2).

• The figure above shows that a case of "shifting the burden" was operating: our sense of urgency forced us to be myopic and unaware of how are actions were contributing to our long-term irreversible problems.

• The "tyranny of the urgent" also prevented teams from interacting with one another, so that supply locations, the finance functions, and the sales officers were working in separate "silos." This resulted in customers facing irregular supply problems, and unreconciled statements of accounts. As a consequence, we face customer alienation, which in turn leads to a need for higher discounts to keep customers happy, which also leads to increased firefighting work, and blame trading within the team (Figure 3).

High Leverage Areas

Dialogue on the above issues led to the team identifying the following high leverage areas:

• One of the high leverage areas they discovered was to have brainstorming sessions between the team members, without blame trading. This could ultimately help members to serve the organization better, and enable them to focus on true customer delight. It was also decided to work together with the customer to find out how we could improve our services.

• The team decided that while implementing the short-term measures, they still needed to focus on the long term, and would need to do away with short-term measures early.

• The direct sales team also discovered that their continuous efforts to get new customers diverted focus from existing customers, and due to
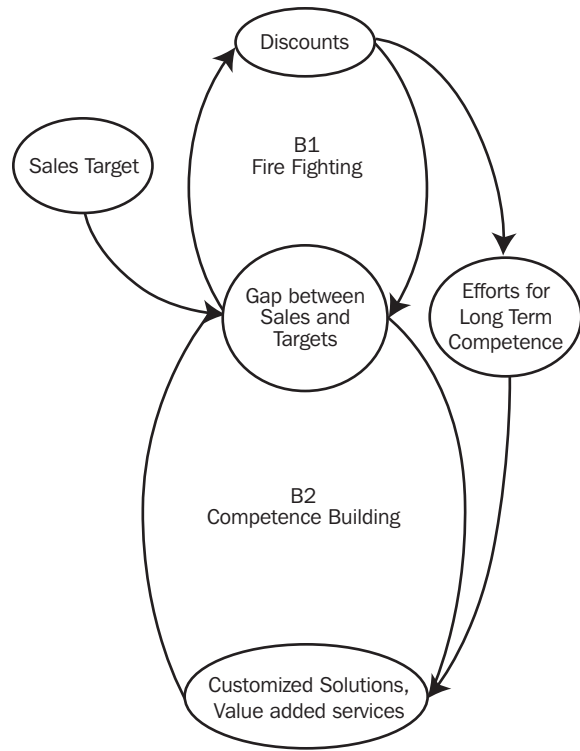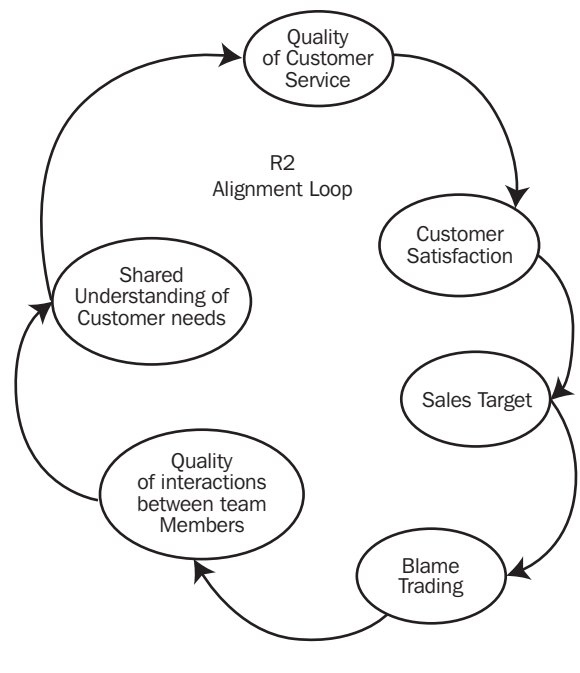

Figure 2

Figure 3

limited availability of product (resulting from limited infrastructure in the area of operations), adding customers was in fact at times a surefire way of increasing customers' dissatisfaction. In fact, limited availability or product was a limiting factor, which did not figure in their calculations, resulting in counter-productive actions of always being on the look-out for new customers. The team decided that they would henceforth focus on existing customers until they could increase the necessary infrastructure required to add new volume demand. However, even to keep the existing customers delighted they would need to focus on building infrastructure. The causal map below describes the structure in operation (Figure 4).

The regional office decided on the following approach:

• Have regular team interactions and brainstorm on long-term actions. The vision they created for themselves is reproduced below.

• Focus on long-term infrastructure building and until that time to focus on delighting existing customers.

• Look for methods to shift away from discounts and other short term measures.

Action Taken

Based on this approach, the following actions were taken and significant results have already been noted, such as:

1. The team members talked to our competitor oil companies and that coordination has resulted in the re-

Figure 4
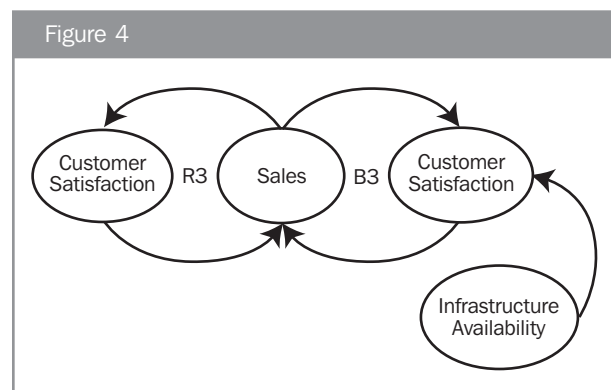
gional office managing with substantially lower discounts. This interaction between oil companies has managed to break the escalation archetype and avoid price wars, which will ultimately benefit everyone.

2. Kolkata DSRO has had regular team interactions, which have built collaboration and teamwork. In fact, the finance officer has worked with the sales officers to produce good presentations for customers, and every member has been involved in interactions which benefit the whole.

3. Large customers like Tata Chemicals were given value-added services and products which enabled us to sell products at better margins than our competitors. The realization that customers look at the final cost and not the price alone has opened up new possibilities to the team.

4. Dialogues have become a continuous source of learning and sharing and the team is learning to learn together.

The vision created by them is summarized in the accompanying sidebar (page 45).

Kolkata DSRO Vision

Kolkata DSRO
• Shall uphold its commitment to conduct all business in an ethical and transparent manner
• Always promotes integrity in action, competitiveness, honesty and sincerity as its most cherished objective
• Is committed to growth with our business associates and fulfilling social objectives
• Delights customers with quality products, innovative marketing techniques and value added services anywhere and anytime
• Is No. 1 in profitability and market share with highest growth rate.
• Team DSRO promotes learning and encourages initiatives to achieve excellence

The creation of a vision, and conducting an analysis of their current reality without defensiveness, has enabled the team in an engaging manner. Since the vision is rooted in their personal visions, working together for a common vision has become a source of continual joy and happiness.

Workplaces need to give us room to discuss together, decide together and work together for goals which are meaningful to those involved. When this occurs, business results are a consequence of our actions, and a source of personal and team happiness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Sri Lanka: A Story of Hope

by Karen Ayas

Karen Ayas

On December 26, 2004 the coastal areas of the Indian Ocean were hit hard by the terrible Boxing Day tsunami, called the greatest natural disaster in modern history. Tens of thousands of people were killed in a dozen countries throughout Southeast Asia. Along Sri Lanka's 1,300 kilometer coastline, more than 40,000 died and a half million were left homeless.

Two and one-half months later, at six in the morning, I found myself in a darkened meeting room at the Galadari Hotel in Sri Lanka's capital city of Colombo with 208 leaders of Unilever's Asian Foods (UFA) businesses, brought to this island country for a week with two briefs. The first: to assist in the relief efforts in two small southern coastal communities. To that end, they would spend two days working on clean-up and rebuilding projects. The second was to continue the so called "Journey to Greatness" – an ambitious leadership development and community-building program that aspires to bringing greatness into every aspect of an organization and its leaders ("Journey to Greatness," *Reflections* Vol. 5, No. 10) – in a two-day program following their work in communities.

While slogging in the unbearable heat and humidity, clearing rubble out of houses, building new community centers, school buildings, volleyball and badminton courts, kitchens, toilets, and shops, the leaders began to connect with local people. When the leaders started working, most residents were bystanders, watching without any spark in their eyes and without the energy to lend a helping hand to their own recovery. As the UFA leaders witnessed the unimaginable physical devastation, they heard horrific personal stories of lost loved ones and lost livelihoods. But as they consoled the families that had been ravished by the tsunami and sang songs and danced with the children in the communities where they had worked, they came to realize how powerful the human spirit is. As one UFA leader put it: "We became aware of our resilience. Even facing the highest level of adversity, we can bounce back and re-build ourselves."

A year earlier in India, work with twenty-some different communities had led the UFA leaders to realize the importance of "mission" and to appreciate the power of belonging to a community. This in turn led them to invest in building their own leadership community and redefining their mission. Sri Lanka was about bringing this mission to life; it meant reconnecting to one another and affirming that as leaders they were both business beings and human beings.

"We came to Sri Lanka because I decided never to close my eyes to misery in this world," explained Tex Gunning, then president of Unilever Foods Asia. "People get lost, organizations get lost, and leaders get lost: we need to be reminded of the power of the spirit within us and rekindle the spirit in others to find our way."

Coming face to face with destruction

Just after dawn on the morning of March 7, 2005, the UFA leaders boarded nine busses to travel to the southern coast of Sri Lanka, where the devastation from the tsunami had been the greatest. As we milled about waiting for the busses to arrive, I wondered like many others what we would encounter the next few days. Although I had worked on the design of the journey, I was full of apprehension. What would people feel as we came face to face with the survivors of such a disaster?

Heading south through Colombo along the Galle Road, evidence of Sri Lanka's rich heritage was all around. To untrained eyes there was little evidence yet of widespread destruction. Crossing the bridge at Kosgoda signaled the passage from the western to the southern region of the country, where ever-increasing signs of the tsunami's destruction came into view: more and more wood shacks surrounded by

Photo: Gerald Gay

piles of lumber and bricks, and soon a large tent city constructed to shelter survivors in Balapitiya. At "the train site," just south of the little tourist town of Ambalangoda, we debarked at the railroad crossing where the tsunami derailed the Colombo–Galle train and more than 1,500 passengers. There the UFA leaders began to witness firsthand the horror of so many lost lives, and the complete destruction of a village and its small fishing boats. As one leader described it, "The place was pregnant with disaster and it was racing towards us in all its ferocity. The community had lost its will to survive, let alone live. What was the contribution we were going to make? These thoughts screamed through our brains."

Half of the group worked for the next few days in the vicinity of Galle, some forty-five minutes down the road from the train site, while the rest continued on for four hours to Hambantota, a dusty little village some 240 kilometers southeast of Colombo, on the border between Sri Lanka's wet and dry zones. Both groups worked in shops, and schools, and residences to help families and villages to rebuild their lives, not just with bricks and mortar, but through rekindling the community's spirit.

Hambantota

More than 4,500 people in the Hambantota district were killed by the giant tidal wave, 1,000 or more of them residents of the village. The surge was so powerful that some houses more than one kilometer away from the shore were pulverized. At the school where one of the UFA teams worked, eighty children, four teachers, and the principal were killed, their bodies collected in the bare yard in front of the school and buried in a mass grave. The destruction was so massive that the Pakistani Army was invited in to bulldoze huge portions of the town. In the process, more corpses were found in the lagoon behind one of the neighbourhood work sites; those bodies were shovelled into another mass grave.

Other UFA teams worked on demolishing unsafe houses, restoring salvageable structures, and clearing the ubiquitous mounds of debris. The work was daunting enough physically. For many, the emotional work of understanding the depth of the families' losses and engaging them in the process of rebuilding their lives was even more difficult.

One UFA leader spoke of feeling overwhelmed by the tragedy related by the nineteen family members living in the small house he was assigned to:

Working and organizing are one and the same, and are creative and social, framed by conversations.

> On the twenty-sixth of December they were going about their lives, some watching a cricket match on television others going about their morning work. Then suddenly they heard a very strong hissing sound, a very unusual sound that they had never heard before. And then the electricity was cut off and the telephone lines went dead.... Before they could understand what was happening, a huge wave, as high as the roof almost, came into the house. The mothers ran to get hold of the children. The husbands ran out to protect the property. They lost their nine-year-old boy, Apeh, who had gone out to play. It all happened in one minute and fifty-two seconds. The house they had built themselves was completely wiped out. The only thing remaining was the clock on the wall which had stopped at nine-twenty a.m., showing the time the wave had struck the house.

Hearing stories like this paralyzed many of the UFA leaders at first. Some seriously questioned how much solace and support they could really offer, and then slowly they began to realize that simply listening, being there, could be enough. "I felt bad thinking I had no way of helping these families," said one. "Later I realized that many of them wanted to pour out their hearts. They just wanted a person to listen to their experiences, the trials they went through during those terrible minutes and how they were coming out of the shock."

At the end of the day, the UFA leaders sat with eachother around a fire pit. They shared stories of their experiences, speaking with raw emotion and genuine caring about the village people they worked with. Many had been profoundly touched by their encounters, as one UFA leader described:

> In Hambantota we worked with a family where the wife was a teacher and the husband had salt fields and a factory. The wave had destroyed their house and their factory. Luckily the family members escaped with minor injuries. While the wife seemed OK, the man looked dazed, lost, and totally out. When we started the conversation he declared that he had lost his memory and everything that he had worked for over the past 20 years. He did not know what to do. We kept talking and I started asking him simple questions related to his business, the factory, the market. Then he saw a few of his inventory log books from under the rubble wheeled away. He picked them up from under a huge load of debris and started sharing the records from 1990. He started to describe how the packing line worked, how his packages were of consistent and good quality. His experience and pride started to show. Feeling something was progressing right I carried on with the conversation. It seemed that the salt fields could be recovered with some work. And he suggested that banks could offer him a loan to rebuild his factory based on his past track record. Here he was getting plugged-in again!

Had UFA's work here really made such a difference? Many felt that it had. "I felt that I had helped to inject some life, hope, and a little bit of happiness into the lives of the family

we were working with," said one of the team summing up his work in Hambantota. "I would even go as far as saying that I almost felt like I had become part of that family." The belief that they had made a meaningful contribution to so many people's lives had taken root. Some thirty-six hours after their arrival in Hambantota, they saw tangible evidence of the difference they made at the brief closing ceremony at St. Mary's College. They realized they had experienced and learned so much here, but how would it fit into their Journey to Greatness?

Serving a higher purpose

From Galle and Hambantota, the groups moved inland, into the hill country. They spent the next two days at a camp in Ella, making sense of their experiences working alongside the amazing people of Sri Lanka, drawing out the lessons about great leadership and exploring how to bring heart and soul to everything they do in their own businesses. Through dialogue, meditation, reading, solitary excursions into nature, and facilitated learning they asked: Do we want to be great leaders? Do we understand what it means to be a great leader? And they grappled with existential questions. Who are we: as individuals, as leaders, as a community? In their last day in Ella, they homed in on one last question: How do we become a great business? How will we bring mission to life? One facilitator's remarks as he prepared to depart were encouraging:

> "What I have seen here the past two days took my words away. This is the sort of thing that should be happening in all organizations. A great business is nothing but a set of great human beings. It is the unification of the personal with the corporate mission that gives birth to a real human world. Work no more becomes separate from one's personal life; it only becomes another medium by which the personal mission is accomplished.

> Consider the nobility of this proposition: If every business evolves itself from being a predator to one that is committed to uplift humanity, our orientation shifts from marketing products to rendering services – tangible or intangible – and changing people's lives. A company that embraces the need to genuinely uplift humanity will nurture this spirit in its own organization. It would allow people's sense of conscience and spirituality to grow, further reforming and aligning the business to the welfare of human beings.

> So, the whole world is waiting for you to do what you have to do.

In the dialogue that followed, Tex underscored the socio-economic role businesses must have, and the importance of serving a meaningful purpose:

How do you evaluate how great a business is? Business results like turnover, profit, and return on investment are all external evaluations of a company. But they alone don't determine greatness. I believe spirit is the key. It determines the way the company interacts with the local community, the customers, and the consumers.

As leaders, we need a whole new level of consciousness about the functioning of organizations, deeply recognizing that it is a living and therefore continuously changing organism, adjusting itself to its new circumstances and to the human players that make it up. You cannot force human beings to adjust themselves to the tyranny of organizational logics in a sustainable manner; you can only let the organization adjust itself to the universal needs of all human beings. They want to live meaningful lives; they want to live in service and care for others; they want the freedom and space to be creative; they want to grow and they want to be part of an organization that helps them to contribute to something that is far bigger than they could ever on their own. When you have a purpose that's higher than yourself you'll find cooperation where you never imagined.

We must therefore somehow become socially and economically coherent. Of course as businesses we need to make money to sustain what we're doing. But we have to have a social meaning that resonates with people like you who volunteer to work here, and with the people we serve. The business needs to be grounded in deep human values and you need to have integrity in your actions.

There were plenty who embraced this approach. "I feel very grateful that I work in an organization that understands the value of caring for the society it operates in," acclaimed one of the UFA leaders. "I now understand that there is work and life in Unilever beyond the pay-check. I believe that Unilever can make this world a better place."

"Neither I nor my team members find any contradiction in our Journey to Greatness and our ambition to build a large and profitable business," said Ashok, head of the foods business in Vietnam. "We shall grow the business, however, with sensitivity, compassion, and with a genuine desire to serve the community around us."

Service learning

In large-group sharing and smaller country sessions, the UFA leaders explored what makes a great business and the path to get there. The shared experiences in the previous retreats, serving communities in India or working alongside villagers in China – and their own initiatives since – pointed to one path: service learning, growing the people and company through community service and learning from that service.

"We have to think about community service," Tex concluded in one of the discussions, "because this is an interconnected world. And we have to see ourselves as one world."

As they discussed how they could bring such "greatness" into their own environment, the majority of teams developed the determination to engage in some form of community service, here in Sri Lanka or in their own countries. Said one, "The bonding here was unbelievable. We will continue with the community work as we firmly believe that even a little act can make such a huge difference." Added another, "My team unanimously agreed to channel

some funds to relief work for the Hambantota housing project. The entire office plans to go down to Hambantota and get involved with the project and the community on the 8th and 9th April."

As for how to ensure similar results in all community service efforts, everyone had plenty to say. "If people are really committed to do community service, don't worry about a thing, it will come," said one UFA leader. "Don't take a kind of typical business approach to tackle these kinds of things. I personally would never force people into doing it, because you have to have a heart in doing this kind of thing."

Bringing mission to life

Service. Care. Commitment. Laudable intentions requiring great strength to translate to action. "We know, more or less," Tex challenged the UFA leaders, "what it is to be a great business, but how do you do it? How do you keep yourself honest on that agenda?" He started to answer his own questions:

> Defining our business in the social-economic sense means that we truly say we are going to take care of the nutritional needs of families. But when we start to talk about positioning, the charter brands, the purpose brands, etcetera, there is still a lot of confusion, and I truly believe that we haven't cracked that nut.

All the country teams took this question seriously – make sure everyone understands, absorbs, and internalizes the mission – and agreed to start taking some action for bringing their mission to life. "We talked about how we can engage, have communities, and be true to the overall mission," shares one leader from Australia, "and we actually looked at what we need to boost our personal journeys. We will work together as a group to keep ourselves energized and to remind ourselves and each other of how we felt here." The Pakistani team discussed how they could start a collective effort – first just with the fifteen of them who came to Sri Lanka – to do something back home as they did here for tsunami victims. "We cannot just try to push it onto everyone. We'll start doing something and then take it from there and make it a bigger project," said Rizwan, their leader.

"Community service is only one part of the Journey," another leader reminded the group. "Perhaps the more important part of the Journey is becoming a better leaders, better human beings, and also better teams. So you have a *business with a human face*. The process doesn't take away the skills, the acumen. But it does bring up the Conscience thing: Am I asking consumers to pay for too much packaging? How can I make products available to low income people?"

Putting Spirit into practice

But the real question that all wrestled with is "How?" How would they put into practice what they came to know on their Journey? How could they be their spiritual selves back on the job?

The spirit displayed by the UFA teams as they worked with the Sri Lankans made many wonder why they couldn't do this with their own teams. As one of them summed it up:

In my group there were people from Unilever from different countries, races, and work levels. People I had never met before. Yet we got together as a team quickly and went about completing our work with amazing speed and focus. No one ordered anyone. Suggestions were given and accepted on the quality of the suggestion alone, and it did not matter whom it came from. No one stopped to see if someone was doing less work. Those who finished immediately went over to help someone who was struggling. I asked myself, why we don't see the same behavior at work? And why do I behave differently at work?

As they continued to reflect and share, there was also commitment to plenty of action at the personal level. "I resolved to build happy, meaningful, and rich relationships with people whose lives I touch and am responsible for. And through these interdependencies I will enrich my contribution to everything I do each day," affirmed yet another.

Those who made similar vows in past Journeys held the mirror up while they renewed their commitments. "In reflecting about where to next, while the experience was different, I have realized my takeaways and actions are exactly the same as after the Indian outbreak a year ago," said one veteran. "What is frustrating is that if I honestly look back I have not done as much as I would have liked. While I think I have become a better husband, father, and leader to some degree, there is still a lot of work to do."

Under the Prayer Tree

Late on the final afternoon of the Sri Lankan journey, the group sat one last time under the Prayer Tree as clouds rolled in and thunder growled in the distance. It had rained not long before, and the huge tree released an occasional sprinkle from its canopy.

"When we started talking about greatness two years ago," Tex reminded the group, "many said that that is for the gods or the Nelson Mandelas of this world, but not for people like us. We have seen yet again that greatness has hardly anything to do with the role that you have in business but has everything to do with who you truly are." He continued:

At a very deep level, we are wise. We know that, but we forget that we know. We're so much caught up with what's going on around us, it's like we're living outside of

Anura's Reflection

I was on the beach in Bentota with my wife and my child. When the first wave came, I thought it was a freak wave. I went to see what was happening. I took my son along. Two minutes later the second wave was coming, and I was in a jeep trying to race back to my wife. It took two or three minutes to get back to where my wife was. It seemed like forever. We talk of tragedies, we see them on TV, we read novels, but only when you go through something like this do you know how fragile everything around you is.

Within minutes, six of my colleagues called me. I never thought that people cared that much for me. That night and the following morning, people were calling and asking what are we going to do now? At first we thought only a hundred people had died . . . then five hundred . . . and on Monday morning at eight o'clock when we met at work the number was one thousand. One thousand people had died. We had to do something about it. We said, let the company do whatever, but we'll put in our day's wage; by midday we said, let's put two day's wages. We bought lunch packets, cooked rice, and found a plane. There was no plan. Everyone knew what to do. They just had it in their hearts. That evening we wrote to the government and many others and we received incredible support. But the first light was lit by people not knowing who was going to support them. We all know how to talk about problems, we all know how to theorize, how to analyze, how to argue. However, this was all about knowing what your heart tells you to do and doing it.

We learned that there was a camp in Ampar on the East coast . . . six thousand people in one camp without a single tent, under polythene sheets . . . six hundred pregnant women and not a single toilet.... Something had to be done, so together with two other companies we decided to go out there to build tents. Suddenly the government told us they had twenty thousand tents they didn't know what to do with. All we had to do was bring the tents there and show a couple of people how to build them. Six hundred tents built in one day. Toilets, same story again. We said, let's do what we can. Sixty toilets came in two days; pits were dug by the tsunami-affected people. They only needed the spark and a little ray of hope and they were ready to get up and do it. Three days later, one of our guys said, how about a nursery? And we found enough ladies in that camp who knew how to look after small children.

We told the government we are committing one hundred million rupees, that's big money for a small company like ours. But that led to a wave of donations from other people. Our company gave us plenty of room; for weeks no one asked about the targets. All they asked was, what you are doing about the tsunami, is there anything we can do to help?

So just listen to your hearts and do what is right. You don't get transformed by experience . . . but by the ability to experience. You need to live it through, to feel it in your hearts. You know, you can be so detached, so factual, typical Unilever executive and you can go through, walk through all that without being moved. But you guys are moved and you're very special people. First couple of days when you were here out in the field . . . I heard that story after story. It doesn't matter how many people you helped or how many houses or schools. What matters are the stories of the tailor, the story of that family, those eight children . . . these are the things that matter and you've done that.

Yesterday we all asked a question, who am I? You asked me the same question. I don't have an answer as I don't think there will ever be words. The only thing I can say is, if we take the first step and the second step, then we walk, and then we sprint, but at the end, we fly!

At the end, we fly.

Thank you for bringing hope to Unilever Sri Lanka and to Sri Lanka. It will never be forgotten.

ourselves. We're living in other people's minds; we're interacting in ways that are not very wise most of the time. To come to grips with who you are, who you want to be, is a long journey. And you will see that the older you get, and the wiser you get, the easier it becomes. And even then you make mistakes.

I'm not asking you to become a spiritual guru tomorrow, and I will never be one. What I'm saying is you have to pull people into your lives if you want to learn, if you want to grow. You can't do it on your own. I can't do it on my own. And there is no recipe.

But it is a gift to you. Grab it if you want. This is your Journey. And this is our Jour-ney to become who we really are.

After a few minutes of silence, as everyone retraced the five-day journey silently with a partner, Tex invited everyone to share whatever they felt still remained to be said.

"These last few days we have been talking about spirituality, searching for the soul and trying to touch souls," observed one of the leaders. It is only when we find our own soul, or get back in touch with our own soul, that we can look at other souls. What was the most difficult exercise we did here? For me it was the silent communication that we had under that tree. Two people sitting in front of each other, not talking but looking into each other's eyes, trying to look into the soul of the other without speaking. . . . When I was trying to look into the soul of my friend here, there was embarrassment, there was nervous laughter. We would move our eyes away. Did any of us keep eye contact for five minutes? I doubt it very much. And if we didn't, that tells us where we are as far as the soul is concerned."

"I learned more here about the value of caring in practice than I could have from any book or lecture," said another. "I learned about the fundamental value of being human and of reaching out again and again. Not only did I reach out to my Sri Lankan friends but to my colleagues. We opened up and shared many things beyond work and we really bonded."

"Leadership is all about helping others, caring for others, creating space for them to learn and grow, and providing them the fertilizer so that they can grow even further," reflected one of the leaders, "but the only way that you can do that well is by knowing yourself well." Another put it this way: "To discover greatness you have to embrace humanity and encounter humbleness. As we become more ourselves we are treading on the path to greatness."

The reflections the leaders shared were laced with thoughts of community, humanity, love, kindness, compassion. "I have more courage now and I see that when I go back home, I just need that consciousness. It's not the scale of what I do that matters, it's my intent." said one. "The journey made me realize that I had more to give," another added. "And the more you give the happier you are in life. Amazing grace is what I feel at this moment."

The group's experiences here – and in China and India on previous journeys – did not change who they fundamentally are, but profoundly enhanced them, sometimes in ineffable ways. Reconnecting with their inner selves and giving of themselves to one another invigo-rated their thoughts, opened their hearts, let their spirits fly, and confirmed their humanity.

As their final sharing continued, they heard many heartfelt and stirring reflections – but none more touching than the words of Anura, the HR director of Unilever Sri Lanka on that fateful day (see sidebar).

They gave him a tearful standing ovation. "At the end we fly . . ." There was nothing else to say.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Stories from an African Learning Village

By Marianne Knuth

Marianne Knuth

Kufunda is a learning village (a learning center) which seeks to support people and communities in discovering and recovering practices and social systems that actually work for them. What 'that actually work for them' means is part of what this article is about.

Our overriding question is the following: What does it take to support people in reclaiming their sense of wealth and possibility, and in that beginning to forge their own learning paths towards a more nourishing and sustaining way of life?

From a letter to my friends, Harare, Zimbabwe, June 19, 2001
I have a dream . . .

We have a small farm of 327 acres, 23 km south of Harare, which we bought in 1984, when our family moved to Zimbabwe (my mother returning after over 15 years abroad). On it we grow maize and groundnuts, cabbages and seedlings for sale, and milk for ourselves and the people in the surrounding area. My mother, sister and I hold a vision of something more – for this to be a place where we do things with and for the people of Zimbabwe. Our dreams intertwine, and I hope to see them co-exist on the farm. For now I have decided to get started. While I do not come with solutions or the way forward for sustainable community, I do come with the belief that together we can figure it out. The answers that people need are in their midst, and if we come together we can discover them.

I hope the centre will bring together community organizers from across Zimbabwe regularly to learn from each other; to deepen their understanding of their situation; to become more conscious of unconscious assumptions that may hold them back (both inherited and cultural); and how they can work with those. It will be a learning community of those people who are working with and for the most disadvantaged Zimbabwean people. The centre will also be space to support young disadvantaged people who have not managed to finalise their formal education. It will be a place to help them grow more fully into themselves, and who they are; help them figure out what they want from life, and how to get there. And the farm will become their home while they were there.

My desire is to challenge their inherited notion of success (from colonialism and the west) and develop, and work with them to recover knowledge and insight from their

own culture. I am inspired by Gandhi, who said that absence of the British does not constitute independence (which officially Zimbabwe gained in 1980), rather independence, or freedom, is the recovery of the self and of the civilisation in Zimbabwe.

I picture a life of simplicity, self-sustainability, and being in tune with nature, a place where, as Tagore said, "education necessarily becomes the preparation for a complete life of man, which can only be possible by living that life, through knowledge and service, enjoyment and creative work." I speak here not only of education, but of creating a learning community in *which we live that life which we believe to be possible:* we create a microcosm of another way of being and doing together.

Kufunda Village Today

Three and a half years later, Kufunda Village has become a reality, and much of the above is being lived out and experimented with. Some of the ideas have changed form and shape, but the core remains the same. The vision and intent are focused on creating healthy and vibrant communities through supporting people as they unfold in their own way in their communities.

Our starting point is that all the communities we work with are unique and special. We recognize this and work off their current wealth, however limited it may seem. Thus, we start from a place of wealth, and "enoughness," instead of from a place of poverty and scarcity. Recognizing that most of the people we work with are deeply connected to their villages and communities, we focus on helping each community expand its sense of what is possible in its context.

We aim for holistic community development working with a cross sector of the community. This means that we don't come into a community to fix a problem. We empower and support people to develop their leadership and capacity to solve their own problems in their own ways. Through our work with a community we have typically focused on:

- broad based learning related to sustainable community;
- re-imagining their community together and
- developing basic action plans and projects to move towards their new vision for the future.

Throughout this, although the community is central to our work, we recognize that we are working with individuals. We take the time for storytelling, to know each other more deeply, to listen to – and integrate – the fears and concerns, and dreams and hopes of individuals, as a way to move towards something that is collective, but which builds on the people themselves.

It has been our experience, that the specifics of the projects that communities choose to engage in together are almost irrelevant, though not quite. Where I am sensing deeper change is in the process of people actually learning to work together successfully, collectively. The realization of what is possible when we come together brings momentum that can go beyond any initial project, be it on sanitation, agriculture or reforestation.

Examples of the visible landscape

The group from the Mhondoro community of Rwizi (an area comprising 14 villages and approximately 7500 people) returned home in late February, 2004, with a few simple but ambitious goals:

To plant one million trees

To each family one compost toilet

To support each family and homestead to shift to organic farming and gardening.

Less than a month later lots had already happened: Two model compost toilets had been built at the Kwari AIDS orphanage, in addition to several of the participants having built their own at home; a model permaculture garden at the orphanage; and 250 leukina trees that have been planted collectively, plus those planted by each individual in their homestead. Additionally new income generating co-operatives have been formed by people who returned from Kufunda.

They seek to involve and educate the community to be able to join them in the work, and through their example to realize the power of working as a team. *"I don't know how to express how precious this learning is. Everyone is saying 'Come to my place. Show me how to make the arborloo [compost toilet].' I am willing to work hard for my community, for something which makes our community brighter."* — Juliet, Rwizii

The group in Zvimba has put a special emphasis on coming together around a collective compost toilet project. They have so far built 44 toilets in the community, involving the local headmen, chief and primary and secondary schools. They are running a community garden project together, as a model for what is possible without using expensive chemical fertilisers and pesticides. They have started a pre-school for children in the community. Several small projects have been started providing for needs in the community as well as generating income (school uniform projects, knitting projects, making fuel efficient clay stoves).

In Rusape two pre-schools have been started. A small knitting school has been started for widows in particular, a nursery project has over 5000 trees, a mix between exotic fruit trees for sale, and indigenous trees for reforestation. They are exploring the possibility of starting a community currency for their area.

In each of these communities, in addition to the practical outcomes, the importance of working together is expressed time and time again.

"I have learned that we need to share the little that we have and that working in a team that we can have a better tomorrow." — Community organizer from Zvimba

"I used to be selfish. I only wanted to work for myself. Now I am experiencing the benefit of working together." — Aquiline Makorovodo

What does it take to reclaim our sense of wealth and possibility?

Telling our story

Initially it was a surprise to me that the story is more important than whatever training people take part in. But when the stories go deep, the learning occurs.

Anna first came to Kufunda in February 2003, for our first community organizers programme. The change that has occurred in Anna's life since then is remarkable. I remember Anna well from the very beginning. She is a beautiful woman, quiet and modest, small and graceful. She works incredibly hard. When she came back to Kufunda for the second time, she and her fellow women community organizers from Rusape surprised us all by how much they had done at home with the inspiration and ideas that they had acquired from Kufunda.

According to her, before Kufunda, she used to sit and wait for change to come to her. That is now a thing of the past. She can't give enough credit to Kufunda for what she, and the women she works with, have accomplished, and yet they have done it by themselves. It seems that it began with a shift in perspective. A shift and realization, more importantly, in their view of themselves. Anna says, "I thought that because I was one of the poorest people in my community I had no role to play. At Kufunda, I learned that each one of us has something special to give. I used to think that because I had no cell phone . . . I could not mix with those more wealthy."

Anna said that when she began to value all of herself, she found the courage to spearhead initiatives which before she felt unable to do as a simple poor woman. And she is very clear that it was her first two week experience at Kufunda that was the beginning of the shift, though it was affirmed and accentuated by the response she received in her community when she began to show initiative and leadership.

Anna places great emphasis on the power and importance of meeting through our stories and of getting to know each other and taking the time to hear and see each other – with respect. "I felt like I was someone when I was at Kufunda. What I said and what I thought was taken seriously. I was helped to see myself as a person first. Not as a poor person."

The community organizers programme that Anna was a part of spent the first two days on an exercise we call "the tree of life." Using the metaphor of a tree, people spend two full days telling their story. From the roots (ancestors and grandparents who have influenced their lives), to the trunk (their life story, often one full of hardship), to the fruits (the gifts and talents they have) and the leaves (their dreams for themselves and their family).

Those two days are always magic. The journey from the roots to the fruits is always one of hardship and suffering. Parents dying early, children passing away from AIDS, not being able to finish school, getting stuck in the middle of the political drama unfolding in the country at this time – whatever the story, almost everyone has a hard tale to tell. If we stopped there, we would know that we were not alone in our suffering, but that would be about it. The move further up the tree to the gifts shows how people have mostly somehow managed to take their suffering and turned it into something rich. The women's ability to listen to and counsel others; the youth's ability to write poetry describing her life; the talent of nursing and caring for the sick; the ethic of hard work . . . and on and on. Often those things that people take for granted – that they do not look upon as gifts or anything special, are small diamonds that have grown out of a life of hardship. They are diamonds and they do need to be recognised and appreciated. And so we spend two days before going into what some may see as the real work, simply in meeting and seeing each other. There is space to speak the pain, but there is a commitment to looking for the beauty too.

Appreciating what is . . .

I have often seen people shift enormously in those few days of storytelling, visibly straightening up in their posture as they tell and retell their story from different angles and perspectives. From being a poor person, laden with problems, you begin to pay attention to and appreciate the gifts and qualities you are also carrying in you. Silas spoke very clearly to it in our conversation: "Realizing who you are. . . . Being poor means you want to be someone, but then you're not looking at what's here; who you are."

Focusing on 'what is *not*' will only cause us to increase our sense of inadequacy. As we invite people to focus on what is working – in every community and person there is some-

thing that works, that is what we choose to focus on – we are inviting them to expand their sense of wealth and possibility. Silas continues "The poor can be materially poor and spiritually rich. We all have something to share. I no longer see myself as poor. If I can give a listening ear to Dumi, then I have offered something. I am not poor."

In this lies a realization of our own wealth. After having focused so single-mindedly on what we don't have, it can be difficult to acknowledge what we do have, or discount it for being worth little or nothing. As Dumi reflected: "I used to think that I don't have anything to give. Marianne is the only one who can give. Why doesn't she give something?" In this there lies an expectation that those who have more should support those who have less. It would be wonderful if the world worked that way, but unfortunately it doesn't. If those who have less are focused on what they feel they deserve, waiting – as Anna was – for something to change, for someone to help, it can easily turn into what we know in this country as victim consciousness. It is not a very generative or resourceful place to be stuck in. Instead it is a giving up of our power and self to the other.

But Dumi continues, "I am realizing however that giving is always done in many ways. In the form of money, sharing ideas, natural resources. In fact we used to think that our natural resources were not good enough to share. If I gave mangai (a traditional food) that would not be good enough. I did not know that Mangai is actually better than the white bread and jam we choose to serve visitors instead. We did not know that our traditional foods have all the nutrients. Now we're realizing that we should go back to our roots. Not just with food." I asked where this conviction that their own food was inferior might come from. The answer

Assumptions of Appreciate Inquiry

- In every community something works.

- What we focus on becomes our reality.

- Reality is created in the moment – there are more than one reality.

- The act of asking questions influences the community in some way.

- People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.

- If we carry forward parts of the past, they should be what is best.

was that those with money don't choose them, and so that which can be bought must invariably be better than what is grown at home. Sikhethiwe said that to her "our own type of food is an example of our poverty. Poor people usually eat traditional food. The rich can buy the processed foods. To show that we have something, and to show respect to our visitors, we then have to buy the expensive, though often less nutritious, foods."

It is not only about food, but it is a good example of the loss of self that has occurred. The shift in the people who we work with, who have reclaimed their pride in their mangai, their local herbs, their community, and their culture, may have come partly through the questions – following the very simple but potent appreciative approach – guiding them to uncover specifically the wealth, treasures and wisdom that they do have as individuals and communities.

. . . Being truthful about what isn't

Appreciating the good is central, then. And yet it is not an excuse to cover up that which is not working. For Anna having the space to speak the pain was just as valuable as the practice of looking at what she had to offer the world: "You may teach many things, but if people are full of problems they are not able to learn."

It has been my experience that people keep their pain, problems and sorrows to themselves. They do not wish to burden others with them. It is a collective and communal culture, but it is much easier to share the joy and laughter here, than that which is not so beautiful and light. I remember a circle at Kufunda. It was a small group, mainly women, mainly widows. Through the conversations of the days before it had become clear that people were under more financial stress than normal after the government had more than tripled school fees in an attempt to keep up with inflation. I forget the exact question I asked. It was along the lines of: "What is your situation and what are your concerns?"

It turned into a circle of grief, and tears. It was a long hard witnessing of what people were suffering under. What struck me most was how afterwards people expressed deep surprise that they were not alone in their suffering. I would have thought it so obvious in today's Zimbabwe that everyone is struggling, and yet the experience of sharing openly the pain and concern was apparently so novel and so comforting to people. It was perhaps a unique circle in the way it opened up the field of collective grief and sharing thereof, but the on-going practice of sharing what is on our heart and mind, seems to be an important release for many people.

The conversation was generative in that it spurred us to set up an educational fund to support the widows and orphans. I believe that even if we had not moved into problem solving

mode from the conversation, the process of sharing in itself brought a significant level of release and thus healing.

Removing money from the pedestal upon which we have placed it

In our questions to people about their learning paths, and their relationship to Kufunda, another aspect emerges very strongly: The realization that money and the material are not in fact the most important aspects to life. This seems to strike young people particularly strongly through their relationship with Kufunda.

Looking back at her young life, Sikhethiwe shares how money was a central part of her concerns from early on: "When I was at school it was a wonderful life. But when you grow up you have to work and make money. Things are hard these days, in terms of the political situation. Even I don't have enough for myself. I worry about my baby's life. If things continue to be hard, am I going to be able to send him to school?" But though things are hard, Sikhethiwe has changed fundamentally in her relationship to money. "Yes we need money but it is not as important as yourself. *You have to love yourself and the way you are first, not just rush for how you can get money.*"

Sikhethiwe goes on to speak to the same sentiments that many others have shared with us. That the experience of fun, love, community, doing what we love, being engaged in meaningful pursuit, that these bring an experience of happiness. In the midst of the same poverty that was always there, an experience of happiness is a strong reminder to what really matters, and money is not the only factor in bringing on joy and meaning. Tracing the source of the realization takes us to being together with others; being in relationship – whether that be through circle, in projects, in exercise, in work or play. *As we lose our intense focus and worry about money, we can work with it in more detached, and perhaps healthier ways.*

Aquiline used to worry about money intensely. She no longer does so, and everything has changed. Her business is picking up, she is doing better than before, and she believes that relaxing around the issue was a key factor: "The worry used to stop me. If it was really bad, I could just sit at home, too worried to do anything. Now I just focus on my work."

Dumisani speaks to the same thing, though a little differently: "I used to think that money was the only thing that could solve things. Now I am doing things without money. Organic gardening, sewing. I didn't have the idea that I can have a garden and get some money from it to start my own projects. Now the garden is beginning to do well. I sell my produce at the local market. In our culture there is an assumption that if you are not married you cannot earn a living. But I am learning that I can do things on my own." Dumi left her husband in mid-1990 after he had taken a second wife, because Dumi had not borne him a son.

What I hear in these and other stories is the gradual realization that you can be happy, and that you can do something, without money. This allows us to disentangle ourselves somewhat from the grip that money holds on us, which is when we find the space to do more, even with little. Dumi continues: "Before Kufunda I just wanted something that would benefit me in my own life. Now I feel like I am a part of the community. You yourself are responsible for improving your community. I used to think that if we got some donors we could improve. Not us by ourselves. But we actually can. I see that now." The community coming together, realizing the wealth in experience that is available to it, appears to release the energy to no longer view itself as entirely unable. It is like when Silas said that "Being poor means you want to be someone, but you're not looking at what's here; who you are." When we do look at what's here, we find there is more than we were aware of.

Sometimes we're afraid to look though. We're afraid we won't measure up to others. Our insecurities keep us hiding our heads in the sand. Fidelis' learning from his years at Kufunda seems to be to stop comparing himself to others, to learn to trust himself. Even if he has less than others: "People judge you based on what they see. Sometimes because you don't have money they don't recognize you. I have learned that the greatest contribution is to give them love. And to be an example, to show people that I believe in myself, even if I might not look like much of anything." He smiles. "In our group there were lots of people who were educated. In the start I was feeling very insecure. After working together for a month I realized that we might be different, but that was not the same as some being better. Some were good at music, some at carpentry, some at farming . . . different than, not better than."

Paying attention to the needs of others

An important part of that shift is also beginning to see that *others are suffering as much, if not more* than ourselves. From that point, we of course do have something to offer, and the focus shifts on how we can help, which is a much more generous and generative place to operate from.

Sikhethiwe spoke to how the deeper sharing that happens in the circle at Kufunda was a real eye opener for her in terms of how others had greater needs than her. "When you're with other people sharing stories, you realize that some people have problems harder than yours. You can learn something from others." Dumi speaks to the exact same aspect: "Being with others brings comfort, but it also brings a realization that others are suffering more than me." And Ticha says, "In life I know there's never enough for everyone, but now I feel like we need to share."

"But now I feel like we need to share." From a place of scarcity to a realization that you are needed. Others need you. Your community needs you. *I don't think we can underestimate enough the power that can be accessed in this shift.* Others need me. People are finding that they do have enough to share. In traditional development approaches, all the poor are seen as poor, those to be helped. We choose to see what they have to give, and in the process that means connecting more deeply as human beings, and discovering that they have more than they were aware of.

I remember a session where we were reading a poem, which invoked that there is a future that is wanting to happen, and it is waiting for us to play our role in co-creating a better, stronger future. Fidelis literally laughed out loud, his eyes were sparkling, "What if the future is waiting for me?" he asked. His life took on a different meaning when he held that possibility.

I don't want to pretend that I understand this aspect entirely, or that I have it all figured out. Absolutely not. People are still struggling; they are still concerned about lack of material access, and yet there is a shift happening here, which is releasing energy, possibility, and removing the focus on what is not. I return to Silas and Anna, repeating their earlier remarks,

Striving for village self-reliance

One of the exciting trends I see, spurred by what is going on in Zimbabwe, is people realizing that they need to become self-reliant, and that the migration to the cities might no longer be their best option (unemployment is supposedly at 70%). Dumi speaks to this, "*I am seeing some of the children out there finish their O levels without a job. The only way they can survive is to return to their rural area and start their own projects, working with their hands.*

Kufunda is reminding us that it is not bad to work with our hands. It teaches us to rely on what we have." Not that it is always easy. There is still the mental framework around work that is looked favourably upon, and that which is not. The simple projects that we support people in getting underway with are not always looked upon with excitement. But they are simple and they allow a community to go a little further in caring for itself. Instead of having to buy synthetic jam and white bread, they can produce more local produce that is both cheaper and healthier.

Taking time to still the mind

Meditation, as we practice it at Kufunda, is simply the act of observing your incoming and outgoing breath, and your bodily sensations, often changing in response to the stream of thoughts that come and go. We learn to watch ourselves with equanimity, and over time begin to realize experientially that change is the only constant. Being attached to one sensation over another becomes a futile exercise, as it too will also change.

Aquiline is a widow of 49. She was married to a policeman who died suddenly in 1984 after a few days of serious illness. She was not at all prepared for widowhood. In living with the stress of having suddenly to look after herself and their 3 children, she developed ulcers in 1986, which she has lived with until very recently.

When we spoke, Aquiline was very clear about where her improvement came from. "Meditation has cooled my heart. I always thought too much. Thoughts were always flowing. Worried thoughts. I was an unhappy person. Now I feel a little more like a free person, meditation clears my mind. I have learned how to see reality as it is. And then to simply face things. The first time I came to Kufunda my eyes got opened. I used to cry much. Thinking about the past, my husband, my life. Now I am much better. I don't worry so much about the future. I work with what I have now." Aquiline stopped taking her ulcer medicines one month ago, and she believes this was possible through the opening that has occurred in her mind through the meditation practice.

Others speak similarly to the subtle power of the on-going practice of meditation. In a culture that does not have much space for time alone, the way which meditation appeals deeply to many of the people we work with, especially the older women, initially surprised me. Now it makes sense. What has come up a lot through the conversations on meditation is how strongly it has released the worries and concerns people used to carry. It seems to link to the other emergent theme of not focusing so intently on that which is not working. Meditation simply observes and pays attention to what is – regardless whether it is good or bad. In holding it all lightly in the mind through meditation, its hold on us is weakened. In paying attention to what is, we become more able to respond more freely both to opportunity and to conflict. Perhaps this is why Aquiline feels that her business is better now, though nothing has really changed, except that she no longer worries so much. I feel this area needs more research. Suffice it to say that it is a key component of our work, and of what we are discovering about what it takes to build healthy community.

Cultivating the ground of community

Every time we ask the question of what has made our community work; what has made people's experience at Kufunda special, or what has been a key learning, the circle comes up. And the circle is indeed a key part of the ground of Kufunda. People seem to connect to fully with it, perhaps because it is a part of the traditional culture.

The Circle

Four Agreements for Circle:

• Listen without judgement (slow down and listen)

• Whatever is said in circle remains in circle

• Offer what you can and ask for what you need

• Silence is also part of the conversation

Three principles serve as a foundation for the governance of the circle. These principles are:

• Leadership rotates among all circle members.

• Responsibility is shared for the quality of experience.

• People place ultimate reliance on inspiration (or spirit), rather than on any personal agenda.

At Kufunda, this is not simply the practice of sitting and meeting in circle. A core set of intentions at Kufunda are related to hosting the space and conversation *where everyone feels included, where each voice is treasured, where there is deep respect for each person and each contribution, and where we actively seek to nurture our ability to listen more fully and less judgementally.* I have found the circle to be a place that can hold and nurture these intentions among a group of people who are in community together. However it is important not to lose sight of these intentions when we place our attention on the circle. The circle can hold them, but the circle alone without them might not be as powerful or nourishing as we have found it to be.

I remember the first time I called a circle at Kufunda. It was the very first programme we ran, and I was sitting with a group of 15 young Zimbabweans. I had arranged the chairs in circle, and prepared myself to introduce the talking piece. Butterflies were swarming in my stomach. Would they think me mad?

It worked like a dream.

A circle is not an event. It is a process. During our programmes, we meet in circle each morning for a check in. During our everyday life at Kufunda, we meet in circle once a week. The circle brings us many things. I have made a clumsy attempt at a distinction:

1. the circle as container – the way a glass surrounds and protects the flame of a lamp, allowing it to burn more brightly – holding the collective intention of a group or community. As such it is where we can bring our problems, ideas and whatever else it feels necessary to bring to the group.

2. presence – there is the quality of presence that the circle brings to us in the moment, when we are seated together in circle.

The results, so far, have been wonderful and refreshing – we have heard men express intense surprise at how much they have been able to learn in honest conversation with women (in the Shona system men and women often confer separately), and of elders being surprised at how much they have been able to learn with and from youth in the circle. Our circles here may differ from how things would be done if they were done in the traditional way, and yet we open the space for the community to co-create their agreements for how they wish to be together and for where they wish to place the emphasis of their collective learning. When going through this consciously as opposed to just continuing with the status quo –

equality, respect and support for each other, almost always get brought forward as important to the group. And then the practice begins.

Conflicts do occur; storms are inevitable in any group. The circle can be seen as a safety net. It does not prevent us from falling, but it gives us somewhere to land.[1] I recall several incidents where the strength of our container was challenged and as we lived our way through it, it strengthened the group. It is like the old saying, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

What are we learning?

It is clear to me that there is much at work in our methods of working with people. And yet it seems to me that there is a more fundamental level, at which our beliefs and the way we connect with people (influenced by our beliefs) touch people. Touched, they are more open to the learning and the co-creation that we seek to engage together. What follows is a brief summary of what the journey has taught me, which speaks in part to this also.

In the beginning is the meeting.
How we meet people determines all else. It appears to be so obvious that I hesitate to speak it for fear of being condescending. Do we meet people assuming the best we can about them? Do we meet each person curious about the miracle of a human being that we are about to connect with? Or do we meet a poor person that we are about to help? When we meet the miracle, the unique woman, the mystery of the youth, or the depth of the elder, however poor materially, then those aspects of people respond to us. I can truthfully, and with great joy, say today that I am deeply inspired by each of the people we are working with, because it is their beauty and power and potential that is opening up to us. That is not to say that they are all super human beings, or that they are not fragile and with problems of their own. It is simply

Aquiline's Story

Aquiline was facing the chaos of picking up her life and continuing after the death of her husband. Her mother suggested using his pension to buy a sewing machine, so that she could sew and make a living through that way. She has been sewing ever since. When I tried to understand what has then shifted with her learning and work at and with Kufunda, she responds: *"Before Kufunda I was not really serious about what I was doing. I thought I was, but now I see I was not. I tried to do budgeting and accounts, but not well enough. I was a little bit stuck. I also simply waited for the customers to come to me. In 2000 I was doing this alone. The local school asked me to make the traditional outfits for the traditional dance group. I then started working with my mother and a third woman.*

When I came back from Kufunda I came back with the idea that working together with others is good. I started hunting for those women who have a sewing machine. Then I realized I could even work with, and teach those who don't. We are now 15 women working together. Some of them only do the tuckings and gatherings, and myself and a few others do the sewing itself. First I was thinking of myself only. I was not thinking of others. Just thinking of money. I was the one who landed the contract, so I did not want to share. I realized that it was not actually fair. Those doing tuckings and gatherings were also contributing. So I suggested that we took an equal share. They were all surprised. From then I became more serious about teaching them. We are one. We are still starting so we don't have so much yet, but I am changed. I have been trained many times before [Red Cross, Sisters of Mercy, adult literacy] but I have never been touched so deeply by those who trained me as has been my experience at Kufunda. Those other experiences did not change me. But this has.

Most importantly I have cooled down. I have learned to take everything as it is, to be myself. I don't cry anymore. I see things as they are and then receive them and respond to them as best I can."

to say there is so much more to most people than we often allow ourselves to experience.

I met Anna Marunda again yesterday. We had a conversation about the wonders she had discovered about herself in the past year. Here is some of what she had to say

"I have learned that I have been an my example in my community for being a widowed woman who overcame severe hardship I have learned that I am a strong woman. I have learned that I can find peace of mind within myself. I have learned that I am healthy – the sickness was in my mind [Anna had an HIV negative result recently]. I have learned that I am a good listener, and I am trustworthy and so people are coming to me, inviting me to join different community organizations."

I don't wish to take the credit for Anna's learning, or for her gifts. Who Anna is, is who she is. I do want to emphasise that *we met her in her wisdom*. We met her in her wisdom. Not in her poverty. Through this she has started seeing her gifts.

We need to acknowledge what is – both good and bad – and then choose consciously what we move forward with.

When we started Kufunda, the desire to bring Appreciative Inquiry to life here was strong. Reality is very different depending on which angles we look at it from. We have seen first hand the power in becoming more conscious of which story about ourselves we choose to carry with us.

However sometimes Appreciative Inquiry can focus so entirely on the good, to the detriment of a full view of a situation. What has become clear to us is that when we bring in an appreciative approach it needs to go hand in hand with releasing that which has been painful, or that which feels limiting. Working appreciatively is not about closing our eyes to that which we do not wish to see. In the tree of life we follow the tree from the roots, up the trunk and the branches. We allow for all the pain and hardship that has been to be expressed. In fact we invite the full story, because often people are not used to sharing these sides. And then we invite them to move beyond. We invite them to now pay attention to the gifts they have harvested through their journey. And it is always invariable a rich harvest.

In our experience, the two have to go together- to acknowledge and express the pain (disappointment, anger, worry), and to embrace and own the beauty. In this we can choose what no longer serves us, which we wish to let go of, and what we wish to step into more fully and move forward with. Only being allowed to speak of the good, can leave us with a gnawing feeling of not being fully truthful about what is.

A friend and trustee of the village has spoken of the idea of Authentic Inquiry as opposed to simply Appreciative Inquiry, making space for the whole – shadow or light.

Great energy is released when we stop focusing on what we don't have; when we stop operating from a place of fearful scarcity.

It has struck me the most just how much seems to be released when people stop focusing in fearful and contracting ways on the fact that they were short on money, or whatever their focus of lack is. When people stop focusing on what they don't have, they seem to be released into being able to do more with the little which they have. It connects with the above point. It is not about ignoring the hardship or the very real lack that may be. By all means, let us express, let us bring it out into the open. But then let us move on. Let us look at what we do have, and what opportunity for movement is available to us with that. We always have choice and we always have something to give.

In fact, the greatest shift seems to occur when people see themselves as being needed by others – the orphans, those poorer than themselves, those who don't know about what is possible with organic fertiliser, and so on. Then new reservoirs are discovered. And then as we begin to give generously from what we do have – be it in the form of knowledge or in kind – our sense of self shifts until we are no longer 'a poor person.' We are no longer a victim, but an agent – and often a positive force – in our own life and in the lives of those around us.

Great energy is released when we stop focusing on what we don't have, nad begin to pay attention to what we do have – which others also need for us to share and give.

There is happiness – and support – available to us in community.

There is pain and stress in poverty, and in not knowing where the money for next terms school fees is going to come from. Increasingly the reaction, in a monetary economy, has been towards contraction, hoarding, looking out for oneself first, dropping out of Nhimbe (community work), and so on. What I feel we are relearning here, together, is the relief, strength and happiness that are available to us when we come back to more traditional ways of working together. Mushandira Pamwe: together we can do more. One is not alone. And in our togetherness we can find the happiness that is most readily available in community and in relationships – working together in the fields, celebrations when we harvest the fruits of our work, shared worship, preparing food . . . these, in community, can bring us a simple but deep reaching sense of belonging and joy. I have seen it, and I have experienced it. What if we could acknowledge it as a more central aspect of so-called "development": The richness that community can offer? I am convinced that there is so much wealth and value in learning to harness the creativity and spirit of the collective, that we have yet to truly discover.

We need basic structures and principles to hold the container of our togetherness.

I still recall Sikhethiwe's surprise at her ability to live in community with people... It is not something that we simply do. It takes work, and in our experience it requires the presence of a strong container in the form of a clear and shared intention or purpose; shared agreements that are alive; and a process through which we continue refining these, and improving our way of working for and with them.

As I have seen the Kufunda community grow, this is my strongest and deepest learning. As we have had to protect and nurture our togetherness, our team – together – we have grown. Each person has grown in that. When it was just me imposing my idea of collective leadership, and what a learning community was meant to be, there was something that wasn't quite right. Now as we work at it together, it is a lot more messy, and quite unpredictable. But it is also more alive and vibrant.

There is a model of the chaordic path put forward by Dee Hock which I increasingly see as an important part of this work. The word *chaordic* is created by the marriage between chaos and order, and the idea is that there is a field on the edge of chaos with just enough order. Not too much order, which is on the side of control, and not with too much chaos, which can simply lead to despair. In this field creativity, and innovation can occur. It is where we can invite in collective intelligence. But to go there we need to be willing to relinquish our control of a set outcome, or a set way, and also be willing to being surprised.

It is a path that I feel we are learning to walk. Sometimes I do slip back into a place of too much control, as do some of the community organizers that we are working with. However

we are in the journey of learning what the basic structures and principles are that create the required level of order, which is neither limiting, nor too little, but rather generative. Just enough to be that glass around the flame, allowing it to burn a little brighter.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marianne Knuth was born in Kenya to a Danish father and a Zimbabwean mother. She grew up in Denmark. Her family moved to Zimbabwe when she was 12, and although she returned to Denmark soon thereafter – at 16 – to continue her education, Zimbabwe has been home since those early teen years. She was a co-founder of the global youth leadership group Pioneers for Change. She returned to Zimbabwe in September 2001 to start what has today become Kufunda.
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Endnote

1 Metaphor from Christina Baldwin, *Calling the Circle.*

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