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Developing Generative Leadership through Emergent Learning

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DEVELOPING GENERATIVE LEADERSHIP THROUGH EMERGENT LEARNING

A Thesis Presented
by
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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING GENERATIVE LEADERSHIP THROUGH EMERGENT LEARNING

December 1996

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This thesis is the current synthesis of a deep exploration of the foundations of collaborative, transformational learning within organizations. I begin with a basic assumption which informs all the thinking that unfolds throughout this thesis: the sustainability of our organizations, and quite possibly the survival of our species, is dependent not on the leadership and the development of a chosen few, but on our collective ability to deeply listen for and sense what most needs to happen within a given group of people and then to act on this.

We live our lives with deeply entrenched, mostly tacit beliefs about deferring to "experts" and the need for strong, charismatic leaders. These tacit beliefs have largely disempowered and disconnected us from accessing our most fully creative, generative selves.

The deepest reservoirs of learning are found in collaborative, "emergent" learning experiences. In essence, the question becomes: what can happen when groups of people gather together as teachers and learners to share their thinking, their imaginings, their hopes and fears? What new thinking can be born? And how might this impact our sense of leadership and collective action?

There are many forms which emergent learning can take. Contemporary structures for emergent learning have many of their roots in the group sensitivity training movement of the 1960s and '70s. Present structures for emergent learning include: the dialogue process, Community Building, Open Space Technology and various hybrid forms of both verbal
and non-verbal collaborative, co-creative processes. The essence of “emergent” learning is an experiential immersion in many of the foundational skills of critical and creative thinking: systems thinking, metacognition, inquiry, empathic and reflective listening, and seeing from multiple perspectives.

While emergent learning structures can have many purposes, I believe the greatest value of these learning experiences is developing the capacity for what I refer to as “generative” leadership. Generative leadership is about developing what I call advanced group sensitivities -- listening for what is wanting and needing to happen within the collective and then having the courage to act on this. It is about engendering a new quality of leadership within organizations -- unfolding, shared leadership as an alternative to traditional, hierarchical control, and authority.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This is a story about new frontiers for learning within organizations. I call it a story because, in part, this is a chronicle of my personal learning journey over the last several years. I believe that our stories -- our experiences and the perceptions of those experiences -- are the most essential gifts we can share with other people. Our stories may also be the most authentic "information" we can share -- in fact, on some important level we can only really "know" what our experiences teach us.

The poet David Whyte further suggests that when we tell our stories, "we often overhear ourselves saying things we didn't know we knew" (Bretton Woods Gathering of Active Practitioners, 1994). I fully expect that as I tell my story I will learn many things I didn't know I knew. I greatly look forward, then, to sharing the path of discovery with the reader.

It is also important to acknowledge that this is the story of what I know in this moment, at this particular point on my learning journey. One of my most important learnings over time is that our narratives are never static. Our perceptions are constantly evolving. Our stories are always dynamic, always shifting. Simply put, this thesis is a synthesis of what I know at this time. It is intended to offer my present understanding of the terrain I have been exploring over the last several years.

One of the challenges I face in beginning to articulate my thinking is that the quality of learning I am most interested in exploring in these pages is meant to be experienced rather than read. The work that I care most deeply about is intended to be lived rather than described. It's a bit like trying to write about riding a bike. It's much more meaningful to just get on the bike and ride, rather than talking about riding the bike. Nonetheless, I will attempt to communicate, through the medium of the written word, some of what I am beginning to understand about what I will call "emergent" learning experiences.
This said, I now turn my attention to providing a larger context for the journey I will take with the reader. In short, we will begin exploring the possibilities for highly integrative and transformative learning in groups. Beginning in chapter one, I draw distinctions between structures that support teaching and those that support learning. I offer a model which I call "the cycle of progressive learning" and will begin closely examining the more "emergent" elements of this cycle. In chapter two, I overview some of the different forms and structures for collaborative, emergent learning experiences and explore their various applications in both my consultancy to organizations and in the facilitation of public workshops and conferences. Chapter three speaks to the deeper purpose and framework for the emergent learning experiences, focusing on building the capacity for what I call generative leadership. In chapter four, I propose an organizational intervention which I believe enables groups to move through a series of developmental skill-building stages which eventually lead to the development of generative leadership. In conclusion, I explore future "stories" and scenarios that may be enacted and evoked as consultants, educators and various change agents seek to create structures for emergent learning and develop generative leadership within organizations of all kinds.

In 1990, an MIT management professor, named Peter Senge, published a landmark book, called The Fifth Discipline, in which he mapped out a model for what he called a "learning organization." Senge defined the learning organization as "organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (pg 3). He created a framework around five disciplines which he felt formed the foundation of the learning organization. These disciplines included: personal mastery, shared vision, mental models, team learning and, most centrally, systems thinking. The book was a national bestseller. Senge became one the most sought after management consultants in the world and the ideas which he offered helped to spur an unparalleled groundswell of interest in collaborative, organization-wide learning.
In the six years since the book was published, several consulting firms have been launched, numerous conferences have begun and hundreds, possibly thousands, of domestic and international companies have drawn upon the ideas and begun to explore more collaborative, systemic ways of learning and being together within organization.

In essence, Senge believed that we must see our lives within organizations through a more systemic lens, see deeper levels of cause and effect, and create learning experiences which are more holistic and integrated. Whereas traditional management consultants have sought to diagnose organizational illness and offer solutions to particular “problems,” Senge offered that the deepest truths surrounding our organizations could only be gleaned by looking at the whole system and by focusing on co-creating desired results rather than problem solving (Fritz, 1989).

It seems clear that contemporary organizations, of all kinds and sizes, are facing unprecedented learning challenges. As our global village becomes more and more interconnected, the very foundation upon which our organizations have stood is shifting. Where once there was certainty and predictability, there is now increasing complexity. Where once there was order, there is now chaos. Global communications technology, combined with increasingly interdependent political and economic systems, has created a new world order which often feels overwhelming and unmanageable.

For decades, organizations have been guided by a very Newtonian model of the world. Companies were thought of like parts of a clock. If one part doesn’t seem to be functioning properly, then it can simply be replaced. Increasingly, there is a growing “quantum” orientation around organizational life. We are realizing that the whole is infinitely greater than the sum of the parts -- that, in fact, we simply can’t understand organizations by reducing them to their fragments (Bohm, 1990; Wheatley, 1992).

A systemic, holistic orientation does, however, create many paradoxes. As we take a less reductionist approach to learning within organizations, it becomes harder to quantify, harder to assess what the tangible impact and value of a particular intervention has been. The less we fragment our learning into bits of information to be isolated and measured, the more difficult it becomes to get our hands around what it is we are actually trying to accomplish.
The burgeoning field of organizational learning, which has evolved in large part out of Senge's "Fifth Discipline" model and the work of several other academics at MIT, is an example of this paradox. Beyond the limited framework of Senge's five disciplines, no one is quite sure what, in fact, the field of organizational learning really is. The field owes its roots to many different academic disciplines, including: organizational behavior, cognitive psychology, quantum mechanics, systems dynamics and learning theory. Quantum physicists and management consultants, alike, have found their niche amidst this terrain and yet have admittedly been touching different parts of the elephant.

While many have chosen to focus their efforts on "teaching" within the field of organizational learning (which may be something of a misnomer), I have centered my attention on creating what I refer to as experiences in emergent learning. In chapter one, I talk more about the distinctions which I see between "teaching" and "learning." For now, I further define my understanding of collaborative, emergent learning and begin to connect these learning experiences to what I believe are also the foundational skills of critical and creative thinking.

What most interests and excites me is the possibility for shared learning and shared discovery. In essence, the question becomes: what can happen when groups of people gather as teachers and learners together to share their thinking, their imaginings, their hopes and fears? What new thinking can be born? And how might this impact our sense of leadership and collective action?

Management consultant, Margaret Wheatley, talks about this uncontrolled, emergent process in the context of what she calls self-organizing systems. Says Wheatley: "Emergence is the surprising capacity we discover only when we join together...Emergence provides simple evidence that we live in a relational world. Relationships change us, reveal us, evoke more from us. Only when we join with others do our gifts become visible, even to ourselves" (1996, pg. 67).

Wheatley believes that the natural world offers us a myriad of examples of self-organizing, emergent systems and yet most Americans have had very little experience in truly collaborative, self-organizing, emergent learning structures. Although we live in a democracy, most of us have lived under the constant veil of authority and control. On a
very deep, mostly tacit level, we are most familiar with structures that support hierarchy and authority. Beginning with our families, we have been taught, both implicitly and explicitly, that some people are in charge (parents) and that others are meant to follow (children). From the time we were very young, most of us have had a fundamental, tacit belief deeply reinforced, namely that the world is made up of experts and non-experts, people who "know" and people who "don't know."

Institutional education has, at least traditionally, also reinforced a hierarchical, expert model for learning. "Students" sit in rows of chairs and listen, usually passively, while the "teacher" lectures about or presents a body of knowledge. The tacit assumption, of course, is that the teacher knows more than the student, that it is important for this knowledge to be imparted onto the student.

In fact, virtually all of our social institutions, including, of course, the organizations in which we work, have continually reinforced messages of power, authority and expertise. These messages are sent in ways that are both explicit and subtle. The explicit messages come in the form of grades, performance reviews, compensation packages and other evaluations. The subtle messages include experiences of exclusion and marginalization in the form of feeling unheard, of being asked to sit in a row of chairs and quietly listen, of having phone calls go unreturned.

Collaborative, emergent forms of learning, at least on the surface, are non-expert, non-hierarchical structures. The assumptions include:

* We each have important information and knowledge to share with each other.

* Some of the most essential wisdom and knowledge already rests amidst the group. As the poet Robert Frost offers, "We dance 'round in a ring and suppose...But the Secret sits in the middle and knows" (1963, pg. 245).

* At a fundamental level, people yearn to feel connected with each other in meaningful ways around shared interests and passions.

* The more that individuals are able to create and define their own learning -- based on preferred learning styles and assessment of what is most needed -- the more potential exists for this learning to be integrated and operationalized.
Human beings are naturally drawn to self-organizing, self-designed learning environments (Wheatley, 1992, 1996).

The intention is to somehow level the playing field. To be very clear, it is not my intention to create egalitarian structures for learning. I do not believe that people are equal. I do not believe that people will ever be equal. The choice to learn within a more collaborative, emergent structure is not a choice of equality, but rather a choice of equal access. The question is not how can we be more equal, but rather how can we learn together and be together in ways that allows for our natural (and often very different) talents to surface and flourish? Egalitarian structures deny diversity. Emergent learning structures, as I have experienced them, actually celebrate diversity. This is a very important distinction which I will continually reinforce throughout this thesis.

One of the central criticisms, I believe, of emergent, self-organizing learning environments is that it negates the value of hierarchy by creating a false sense of equality. On the contrary, it is my deep conviction that the essence of truly collaborative, emergent learning structures is that they allow for more natural (and often parallel) “hierarchies of talents and skills” to form.

As a culture, we traditionally place people (whether it be parents, teachers, managers, or politicians) in leadership positions based on perceived notions of expertise and knowledge. In some important ways, these people may, in fact, have superior knowledge, experience, and expertise. The dilemma of traditional hierarchy is that we expect these people to have knowledge and expertise in areas in which they are not at all capable to serve. In essence, the followers often collude with the leaders to instill the leader (the expert) with far more power than he or she could possibly deserve or even want. And, conversely, the followers often feel quite disempowered. The result is a deep level of dysfunctionality and paralysis which pervades our organizations, our culture and quite possibly our planet.

At an intellectual level, we understand that no one person can be all things to all people. And yet, time and time again, we set up our institutions to rely heavily on the insight and wisdom of a chosen few. One of the fundamental assumptions of this thesis is that it is no longer functional and no longer sustainable to rely so heavily on individual leadership.
Simply put, as we enter a time of unparalleled change and complexity, no one person or persons can possibly have enough knowledge or perspective to lead alone.

When describing the challenges of leading contemporary organizations, I often use the parable of a mountain climbing expedition. I acknowledge that this is a somewhat exaggerated metaphor and yet I believe it is useful.

There was a time, not so terribly long ago, when "the path" was clear and well-defined. There were handrails on both sides and a covering overhead to protect against wind and rain. There was only one path and the guide (a.k.a. the CEO) had climbed up and down the path enough to be a more than adequate expedition leader. No one needed to question his absolute authority. He managed, quite successfully, to safely lead his party to the top.

Today's organizations, however, are characterized by a very different mountain climbing experience. Whereas once there was only one clearly defined path, there are now dozens, possibly hundreds of different ways to reach the summit. Most of the paths are largely unexplored. There is much uncertainty about the equipment which is needed to make the climb. Furthermore, the weather patterns on the mountain are wildly variable. Also, no one is quite sure what wildlife lives where and whether the animals are friendly or menacing.

Whereas once it made sense for one person, or a small group of "experts," to lead the climb, it is no longer viable. What is being called for in the organizations of today is an increasingly fluid, integrated blend of expertise and leadership. Drawing again on the mountain climbing parable, no one person, or small subset, can possibly understand the topography of the land, the meteorology of cosmos, the behavior of the wildlife and the full capacities of the expedition party in order to successfully lead the journey. And even if this person or small group of people did have the capacity to be all things to all people within the expedition party, it's not a very sustainable way to function while trying to navigate an increasingly shifting and challenging mountain. In all likelihood, the increasing pressures of this kind of solitary, isolated leadership will lead to some sort of physical or emotional (or worse yet economic!) breakdown, or, at the very least, to an inordinate number of sleepless nights while dangling from a hammock at 10,000 feet.
This integrated, fluid, and evolving dance of leadership is, for me, the most salient purpose of collaborative, emergent forms of learning and one which I will explore throughout much of this thesis. It is the essence of what I will continually refer to as "generative" leadership (Jaworski, 1996). Simply put, I believe that the sustainability of our organizations, and quite possibly the survival of our species, is dependent not on the leadership and the development of a chosen few, but on our collective ability to sense what most needs to happen and then to act on this.

All of which inevitably begs the question, what are some of the foundational skills of generative leadership and how might we begin to develop them? It is my belief that many of the critical and creative thinking skills rest at the center. They include:
* seeing through multiple perspectives.
* metacognition or what Harvard Management professor, Chris Argyris, describes as "double-loop learning" (1994, pg. 78).
* listening for different levels of meaning and inquiring into deeper, often hidden, assumptions.
* examining and contrasting different mental models surrounding current reality as well as future scenarios within organizations.

In essence, the skills that are most demanded in today's world are a flexibility, adaptability and creativity of thinking – the ability to see possibility where before there was none.

Again, though, we are faced with a fundamental paradox. In an effort to become more whole and to function more collaboratively, it is tempting, once again, to identify a fragmented skill set that will lead us to this place. This is the old story, that the sum of the skills will equal the whole. I don't believe it is true.

The essence of collaborative, emergent learning experiences is a focus on wholeness and integration. The skills of critical and creative thinking which I listed above are not so much new skills to be taught, but rather inherent aptitudes to be further developed. Again, this is a very important distinction. As a culture, we are very oriented around learning new tools, discovering new information. And yet, it is my belief, that many of our most vital
critical and creative thinking skills are inherent aptitudes which lie dormant within us, waiting to be reawakened.

Furthermore, these skills can never be realized in a vacuum. As social creatures, we can never fully realize our potential except in relationship, in dynamic interaction. Our development and growth always unfolds in ways that are dynamic and quantum, rarely predictable and linear.

In his book, *The Age of Missing Information*, Bill McKibben (1992) says that as a culture, we often confuse information and knowledge with wisdom and understanding. What is most needed, he says, is not more information, more knowledge, more impressive skills or faster tools, but rather more effective ways to integrate and understand what we already know.

This, I believe, is the call for emergent learning.
CHAPTER 2
EMERGENT LEARNING

Thirty years ago, in a speech at Harvard University, the preeminent humanist
psychologist, Carl Rogers (1967), spoke about his disdain for teaching. "Teaching, in my
estimation, is a vastly over-rated function. Having made such a statement, I scurry to the
dictionary to see if I really mean what I say. Teaching means 'to instruct.' Personally, I am
not much interested in instructing another in what he should know or think. 'To impart
knowledge or skill.' My reaction is, why not be more efficient, using a book or
programmed learning? 'To make to know.' Here my hackles rise. I have no wish to make
anyone know anything....But there is more in my attitude than this. I have a negative
reaction to teaching because it raises all the wrong questions. As soon as we focus on
teaching the question arises, what shall we teach? What, from our superior vantage point,
does the other person need to know?" (pg 103).

For Rogers, contemporary society, even in the 1960s, was calling for a new experience
of learning. He goes on to add in his Harvard lecture: "Teaching and the imparting of
knowledge make sense in an unchanging environment. This is why it has been an
unquestioned function for centuries. But if there is one truth about modern man, it is that
he lives in an environment which is continually changing. We are faced with an entirely
new situation in education where the goal of education, if we are to survive, is the
facilitation of change and learning. The only man who is educated is the man who has
learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has
realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a
basis for security" (pg. 104).

Other, more contemporary learning theorists, have offered similar sentiments in the
context of organizational life.
Says international management consultant, John W. Thompson: “A company’s ability to learn and innovate is a direct driver of the company’s capability to increase revenues, profits and economic value” (1995, Learning Organizations, pg. 85).

Organizational transformation consultant, Jayme Rolls, offers the following: “Change is the constant. The only way to survive is as a learning organization -- to continually adapt, learn, be change-responsive, to reinvent reality and the future, to transform” (1995, Learning Organizations, pg. 102).

But perhaps it is Eric Hoffer who describes the current reality of our organizations best when he says, “In times of change, learners inherit the world, while the learned remain beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists” (1995, Learning Organizations, pg. 112).

What was true for Rogers in the 1960s is expressed even more urgently today by numerous educators and consultants alike. As our social, political and economic institutions undergo dramatic transformational change, what is being called for, in no uncertain terms, are more adaptive, more creative forms of learning and leadership. And yet, as a culture, we mostly know structures that support more traditional methods of teaching, “the imparting of knowledge,” as Rogers describes it. We have deeply rooted, tacit beliefs around expertise and authority. We have few models for shared learning and shared leadership. In part, I think it’s because we greatly fear abdicating control. For most of us, it feels like an invitation into chaos and anarchy.

It is my belief that intentionally entering into the “chaos” of collaborative, emergent learning -- abdicating much of the control and the hierarchical structures within which we are most familiar -- is where the deepest possibilities for genuine transformation reside, both within individuals and organizations.

Peter Block talks about “instruction being the patriarchy of a learning institution” (keynote address, 1985 Systems Thinking in Action Conference). Block believes that most of the training which takes place in organizations is a kind of “adaptation therapy.” “It’s like going to a therapist so I can adapt to my life rather than having to change it,” says Block.
And so the question becomes, what does it take to facilitate genuine transformational change, both within individuals and organizations? What kind of learning infrastructures might best support the deepest levels of change and transformation?

I am continually guided by a model for change which psychologist Milton Erickson offered. Erickson believed that in order to change belief systems, we must create a new context, which changes perception, which leads to a change in behavior, which then leads to a change in beliefs. Typically, change is leveraged at the belief level. However, changing the context (both psychological and environmental) is the most powerful leverage for sustainable change (Markova, 1994, pg. 197).

Most of our familiar models for training and instruction (which are largely based on transferring a predetermined body of “information” from one person to another) are intended to impact the learner at the “belief” level.

In collaborative, more emergent forms of learning, on the other hand, the intention is to change the context for learning. By inviting people into a shared learning experience where many voices can be heard, where multiple perspectives can be explored, where deep assumptions can be surfaced and challenged -- this begins to shift the mental models which form beliefs.

Harvard management professor, Chris Argyris, calls this examination of mental models “double-loop” learning. Argyris describes single-loop learning as “asking a one-dimensional question to elicit a one-dimensional answer.” In single-loop learning, the learner assesses the environment and responds to this assessment alone.

Double-loop learning, on the other hand, “takes an additional step or, more often than not, several additional steps. It turns the question back on the questioner...Double-loop learning asks questions not only about objective facts but also about the reasons and motives behind those facts” (1994, pg. 78). In double-loop learning, the learner begins to examine the mental models which he or she holds about the environment and the different possibilities for behavior within this environment.

In the “critical and creative thinking” literature, the experience of double-loop learning is often referred to as “metacognition” -- the skill of reflecting on oneself as a learner, of examining one’s own thought process.
For me, the collaborative, emergent learning structures offer the most exciting, dynamic learning experiences I have ever known -- a powerful immersion in double-loop learning. And yet, while it is most compelling to “see everything as a nail now that I have a new hammer,” I believe that the collaborative, emergent learning experiences, alone and at the exclusion of other forms of learning, offer a limited range of learning. In order to affect sustainable, transformational growth and learning, in both individuals and organizations, we must honor a complete cycle of learning. I have come to call this model the “cycle of progressive learning.” It includes:

* **STRUCTURED LEARNING.** The transfer of information and knowledge from teacher (expert) to student (learner). As I have stated before, this is still the bread and butter of most training and teaching within educational institutions and organizations. In structured learning, a foundation of skill and knowledge is passed from the expert to the learner. Depending on the needs of the learner, didactic teaching is most useful. It is clear, however, that when the knowledge and understanding between expert and learner is limited to a one-way flow, the learner becomes dependent on the expert and the learning is often limited to an intellectual understanding (“single-loop learning”) rather than a deeper, “double-loop” integration. In structured learning, the “teacher” controls both process and content.

* **FACILITATED LEARNING.** Still an “expert”/learner model and yet the learning is more interactive, more experiential. The student/learner is invited into the learning experience and his or her knowledge is more deeply valued. The dialogue is shared and yet the expert is still largely structuring the process and controlling the parameters of the learning.

* **EMERGENT LEARNING.** “Teacher” and “student” become co-learners together. The “whole system” is brought into the learning experience and each individual is empowered to identify and generate his or her own learning in self-organizing ways. This is about developing a very different relationship to expertise. The learning is more organic and more systemic. Deep assumptions and mental models are carefully examined which leads to structural transformation.
While I spend most of my time in this thesis exploring the emergent ends of the cycle, I believe that the whole cycle is important. We all need teachers to present their knowledge to us and we all need to have our learning guided (and yet our input valued) by more experienced "experts" and we all need to feel and understand the enormous generative possibilities for genuinely emergent, largely self-organizing learning.

Again, I emphasize that while we are beginning to appreciate the generative possibilities for learning together in more "facilitated" and "emergent" ways, I think it is important not to mitigate the value of some forms of "teaching." Simply put, we sometimes don’t know what we don’t know. Generally speaking, I believe that, as a culture, we are suffering from an overabundance of "information," that what is most needed are more effective ways to integrate and understand the information we already have. Nonetheless, it would be irresponsible and inappropriate not to acknowledge the essential role which certain forms of "structured," didactic teaching still play within organizations and as a function of our educational system as whole.

There is another model of learning which often guides me in my work with organizations (Seymour, O’Connor, 1993), particularly as I attempt to introduce, develop and integrate certain skills and practices. The central thesis is that, as we learn, we move through a series of stages that include:

1) **unconscious incompetence** -- we don’t know what we don’t know or what we can’t do.
2) **conscious incompetence** -- we come to realize what it is we don’t know or can’t do.
3) **conscious competence** -- we learn new skills or develop new knowledge or aptitudes and yet as we develop these skills and aptitudes, we are aware of consciously practicing and reinforcing them.
4) **unconscious competence** -- at a certain level of competence and after a certain degree of practice, skills and aptitudes become sufficiently integrated into our behavior, into our day to day functioning that we are no longer “conscious” of our aptitude, i.e. we know more than we can say.
Viewing this model through the lens of the cycle of progressive learning, it is often necessary to “teach,” to provide “structured” learning experiences in order to move people from a place of “unconscious incompetence” to a place of “conscious incompetence” and often to a place of “conscious competence” (although I believe that developing “conscious competence” is also the terrain of “facilitated” learning).

In later chapters, I further explore the cycle of progressive learning in the context of leadership development within organizations. For now, though, I continue to focus my attention on distinguishing the different types of learning within the cycle. In particular, I want to draw clearer distinctions between “facilitated” and “emergent” forms of learning.

Organizations are increasingly welcoming more “facilitated” learning experiences. As I have already indicated, organizations (and academic institutions alike) are beginning to understand that traditional forms of didactic teaching, alone, are no longer useful in highly dynamic and complex work environments that are characterized by precipitous change. In essence, trainers and consultants are beginning to understand that people want and need to be more involved, more invested in their learning.

Since the 1970s, there has been a steady rise in the introduction of experiential, hands-on learning experiences into the corporate culture. One notable example is Outward Bound, an adventure-based, highly experiential learning program, first developed by Kurt Hahn, that has offered countless groups of people an opportunity to learn more about themselves and their relationship to each other by offering guided wilderness adventures. The premise of Outward Bound, as reflected in the Erickson model for change, is “training through rather than for” (Miner and Bolt, 1981, pg. 34). Through challenging ropes courses, mountain climbs or river raft trips, participants are thrust out of their comfort zone into completely new psychological terrains. Hahn’s initial vision was, in essence, “an intense experience surmounting challenges in a natural setting, through which the individual builds his sense of self-worth, the group comes to a heightened awareness of human interdependence, and all grow in concern for those in danger and in need” (pg. 34).

The results are frequently impressive and yet, as is often the case, there is a question about how much learning is actually transferred back into the workplace. In other words, people have wonderful, powerful learning experiences once they are taken “out” of their
normal work context and yet, once they return to their place of work (an environment which remains dramatically different from the Outward Bound context), how much learning is actually transferred and sustained?

This is an important question in all experiential-based learning programs, including much of the “team-building” training which has grown very popular in organizational change efforts. Again, the premise of these learning experiences is that by giving people an opportunity to become active participants rather than passive observers, there is a greater likelihood of genuine transformational change.

It has been my experience over the last several years, as both a designer and facilitator of transformative learning experiences, that most consultants and facilitators, who are striving to support transformational change efforts in organizations, are very supportive of “facilitated” learning experiences. This is fast-becoming the primary paradigm for learning interventions within organizations.

It has also been my experience that most facilitators and consultants understand little distinction between “facilitated” and what I’ve come to call “emergent” forms of learning. While these distinctions are often subtle, I also believe that the distinctions are most important and have profound implications on the quality and depth of the learning experience.

Here are several assumptions that rest at the foundation of “facilitated” learning experiences:

* People learn more effectively by doing -- people want an active, rather than passive, role in their learning experience.
* Once material and information has been intellectually understood, people need an opportunity to practice new skills, tools and techniques.
* Humans are social creatures and learn best in collaboration with others.
* We each have important information and knowledge to share with each other and yet, in facilitated learning, the facilitator controls, to a great extent, the parameters of this sharing. The tacit assumption is that the facilitator needs to guide and direct the learning -- that, in fact, the facilitator still “knows” what the group needs to learn.
The design of “emergent” learning experiences offers a similar and yet distinct set of assumptions. They include:

* The more individuals are able to create and define their own learning -- based on preferred learning styles and an assessment of what is most needed -- the more potential exists for this learning to be integrated and operationalized.

* What we can discover and create together is far greater than what we can discover on our own or with the structured “guidance” of an expert. As Margaret Wheatley describes in *A Simpler Way*, “Any time we join with others, newness and creativity pop up to astonish us. The surprise within the surprise of every new discovery is that there is ever more to be discovered” (1996, pg. 69).

* We cannot fully understand the process of learning in community without fully co-creating and co-designing the process of learning in community. In other words, as long as someone else is creating and defining my learning experience, I will be limited in my ability to create truly transformative learning structures.

It is this last assumption which is most essential. Another way of saying this is that *how* I learn needs to mirror *what* I learn. If, for example, I am trying to help an intact work team within an organization become more empowered, to take more initiative and to share leadership, then *the way* I help them learn together will be just as important (if not more so) than whatever message I may bring.

Consultant Peter Block describes this need to have process mirror content when he asks, “How can we act out in this kind of a learning structure something that embodies the intent of the content that you’re hearing about?” (1995, Systems Thinking in Action Conference).

Margaret Wheatley adds: “Large organizations spend a great deal of time and resources on training people in behaviors under such topics as diversity, communications and leadership. But these behaviors are not a list of rules or techniques. They arise from agreements about how people will be together. Often these agreements are unspoken. We can’t train people to be open, or fair, or responsible if the real agreement is that we must succeed at all costs, or that we have no choice but to keep laying people off. Training programs can never resolve deeply incoherent messages. Neither can legislation.
Behaviors are rooted in our agreements. They change only when we bring to light these unspoken commitments. Our behaviors change only if we decide to belong together differently" (1996, pg. 63).

I believe that adult learners today are keenly perceptive of mixed messages, however subtle they may be. If, for example, people are seated in rows in an auditorium listening to a lecture about personal empowerment and the need for shared leadership, then regardless of the clarity or the power of this “message,” I don’t believe that the “intent of the content” will have the same transformative value as when these same learners join together in a learning environment which deeply reflects and reinforces the intended “message.”

I believe that the subtle signals which we send to fellow learners include the physical environment in which we learn. The image and the metaphor of both “facilitated” and “emergent” learning experiences is the circle. The symbol of hierarchical, patriarchal methods of teaching is the triangle. When we teach, at least in traditional ways, chairs are lined up in rows with all of the attention focused on one person, the expert. This is the symbol of patriarchal, high control systems. When we learn while configured in a circle, we reinforce the following:

* we are all teachers and learners together.
* much collective wisdom and knowledge resides among us.
* input and feedback and dialogue is valued.
* while we are not all equal, our voices are equally valued.
* we seek to build community, at least on some level, and develop a connected web of relationships.

While “facilitated” learning experiences value input and the sharing of knowledge and experience, there is still someone guiding and controlling the process, setting the agenda, if you will. In “emergent” learning experiences, there is a far greater emphasis on inclusion and true collaboration. While the collective voices of the group are valued and acknowledged in facilitated learning experiences, it is still a group with a predetermined leader or leaders (i.e. the teacher, workshop facilitator, boss, etc.) Environments that are designed for emergent learning experiences are considered “leaderful” -- each person is, in essence, empowered to share in the leadership of the group, depending on circumstances.
and the needs of the group. While chapter three more carefully examines the use of emergent learning experiences to intentionally develop qualities of shared, generative leadership, it is important, at this time, to at least clarify that facilitated and emergent learning experiences are most distinguishable in their respective relationship to authority, expertise, and control.

In facilitated learning experiences, power and control (at least around the structure of the learning process) rests largely in the hands of the facilitator/leader. And so, even though input, knowledge, and experiences are shared to a substantial extent, the leader/facilitator is still establishing the deeper frame for the learning intervention, still in control of the deep structure.

In emergent learning experiences, the deep structure is co-created, co-designed. Again, I want to reiterate that I see this process as "leaderful" rather than "leaderless." Admittedly, emergent learning experiences are often characterized by considerable, seemingly anarchic struggle around authority and leadership. In fact, this is precisely the argument that is most often used in disfavor of this type of learning experience. It is far more efficient, it is reasoned, to have a clear facilitator, a clear leader who can set the agenda. The conventional wisdom is that much time and needless energy is wasted in the process of struggling through leadership, authority and relationship issues.

Emergent learning experiences are, in fact, often quite "messy." Like the early Tavistock and T-group experiences which serve as the theoretical foundation for the modern-day equivalent (more on this in Chapter Two), emergent learning experiences often feature considerable frustration, pain, and uncertainty.

It is my strong belief, however, that it is precisely out of this experience of "chaos" that more functional and more creative organizational forms can be born. A term that is often used to describe this experience is "chaordic" -- order out of chaos (Hock, 1996). Many contemporary organizational learning theorists believe that the leading organizations of tomorrow will begin to embrace chaos and self-organization as powerful enablers of new learning and organizational regeneration (Wheatley, 1992, Hock, 1996).

While I have drawn many distinctions between facilitated and emergent forms of learning, it is also important to acknowledge, particularly for the more skeptical reader,
that, in practice, we almost never have a purely facilitated or purely emergent learning experience. If we see these two learning structures as occupying different positions on the spectrum or cycle, then absolute distinctions between facilitated and emergent learning are mostly theoretical. In practice, most of the learning experiences which we design as interventions are almost always some blend of both facilitated and emergent. For example, even when I design a T-group emergent learning laboratory with no ostensible structure or facilitation, the very act of convening the group and providing even minimal context is, in fact, a facilitated, planned process.

Perhaps at this point it is important to provide additional clarity around the meaning of "facilitated," or rather the different set of meanings. The Webster dictionary definition of facilitate is "to make easy or easier." In the context of "facilitated" learning, as I have defined it, the facilitator "makes easier" by providing a particular structure and by guiding the learning process based on his or her perceptions of what the group most needs. The important distinction, in facilitated learning experiences, is that much of this structuring and much of this guiding is predetermined, pre-planned and pre-meditated. While there is still an ever-present quality of "facilitation" in emergent learning experiences, this quality of facilitation "emerges" out of what is happening in the moment within a particular group of people. In other words, the facilitation is truly in response to what is happening here and now -- which, I believe, is actually much closer to the literal definition of "facilitation."

And so, when I speak of emergent learning experiences of learning laboratories that are "leaderful," by no means are these environments void of facilitation, but rather the facilitation is shared and organic, based on what is happening in the moment.

As I have alluded to before, I largely see both facilitated and emergent learning as the development of a new relationship to information. As a culture, we have come to believe that "information" is something "out there," something that is separate from us, something that we need to obtain. I think that this deeply rooted mental model is endemic to the fragmented, transactional view of learning that most of us have known over the course of our lives. "The problem with this [transactional] view," says Peter Senge, "is that the self is not separate from the ideas and assumptions that form it. Our mental models are not like
pieces of clothing we can put on or take off. They are basic constitutive structures of our personality” (1995, pg. 38).

Again, I emphasize that both facilitated and especially emergent learning experiences are about accessing, processing and integrating the “information” that already rests among us. Margaret Wheatley, who has written extensively on the transformative value of “self-organizing,” emergent learning structures within organizations, says simply that “information can be created every time we bring people together in new ways” (1992, pg. 115).

But because much of this information is tacit and “relational,” rather than grounded in external statistics and measurements, we tend, as a culture, to dismiss much of it as “touchy-feely” or as lacking the relevance of more salient business “data.” I think this is deeply reflective of the fragmentation of our thinking. As we move further and further into a technological, informational society, our organizations increasingly tend to become oriented around developing specialists, experts in a given field. And while this is useful on some level, it is also deeply problematic as we attempt to develop workers and managers who are better equipped to see the business and the organization as a whole. As Peter Senge points out, “the word health has the same roots as ‘whole’” (1995, pg 18). If our desired outcome is a workforce which is more generative, more empowered and self-actualized, more in tune with the deepest needs of the organization, then we must create learning environments which provide practice fields for developing wholeness rather than fragmentation.

As Peter Senge goes on to offer: “Static notions of who we are must be checked at the door. In transformational learning, there are not problems ‘out there’ to be solved independent of how we think and act in articulating these problems. Such learning is not ultimately about tools and techniques. It is about who we are” (1995, pg. 38).
CHAPTER 3

FORMS AND METHODOLOGIES

In the previous chapter, I described some of the theoretical underpinnings of emergent learning and distinguished this type of learning experience from other forms of teaching and facilitation. In this chapter, I begin describing some of the forms and structures for emergent learning that I have been exploring over the last couple of years.

As I begin to articulate some of the forms that this work can take, I want to continually be mindful to demystify these learning experiences. As much as possible, I want to provide concrete descriptions and focus on the very practical utility which this work offers for improving how we might work and ultimately live together.

Although we rarely label it as such, each of us experiences “emergent learning” virtually every day in the form of conversations with friends, family and co-workers. Aside from formal meetings and other service transactions, most of our communication could be described as “emergent.” By this I mean:

* We rarely have a clear structure or boundary for the conversation we plan to have, i.e. we don’t have carefully planned scripts.

* Most of our conversations are self-organizing. In other words, the conversation meanders and unfolds in order to meet the in-the-moment needs of the people participating in the conversation. Simply put, most of our conversations are in service to what wants to live between us, among us, rather than about some prearranged agenda. Even with an expressed purpose, at least in the context of day-to-day communication, we often find ourselves following tangential threads of inquiry and exploration. Most conversations take on a life of their own. We may start with an idea of where we want to go, but when two or more people come together, something new is usually created.

It is important to add that the emergent nature of most human interaction is a largely tacit process. We are not conscious of just how chaotic, how utterly unpredictable most of our
interaction actually is. Our relationships are almost never like movie scripts that play out in an orderly, controlled fashion. Uncertainty and emergence almost always rests at the center, rather than the edge, of human interaction.

So why is it, then, that we’ve traditionally chosen to create learning structures that are grounded in the illusion of predictability and control when, in fact, the essence of relationship and organization is a constantly shifting, dynamic, emergent process? In this sense, emergent learning structures are more natural ways to learn, more reflective of how we actually interact.

The early pioneers of group dynamics/sensitivity training (what in the late '60s, early '70s would evolve into the field of organizational development) came to realize that there were very few opportunities for people to experientially examine how they behaved and interacted together in groups. W.R. Bion’s work at the Tavistock Clinic in England in the 1940s marked one of the earliest attempts to understand how power, authority and control is exercised in group life (Goldberg, 1970). The construct of Tavistock “conferences” is simple, yet often deeply transformative. Small groups of people (usually between eight and twelve) gather together for periods of time lasting between several hours up to several days. Typically, the group has no prearranged agenda, schedule or prescribed set of activities. The purpose of the experience is to reflect on one’s own behavior, identity and leadership amidst the development of the group. While there is no formal leader or “teacher,” a “consultant” is present to help “alert participants to the ongoing group process and encourage them to study and explore the effect the group experience has on them as members of a social unit” (Goldberg, 1970, pg. 39).

Initially commissioned by the British army to help enable more effective, capable leadership and mitigate intragroup tensions, the work of W.R. Bion and the Tavistock Institute helped birth a new understanding and appreciation of examining group process.

In the United States, beginning in the late 1940s, the work of National Training Laboratories (NTL) also led to the important development of models and structures for intensive, experientially-based group work. Throughout the 1950s and further escalating in the late '60s, early '70s, there was a growing interest in experientially-based group process learning, what came to be known as “sensitivity training.” Much of this work
centered around "T-groups." Like its earlier predecessor, the Tavistock conference, T­
groups provided participants with an opportunity to explore group behavior within a living,
learning laboratory -- primarily "helping people become aware and appreciative of attitudes
and behaviors they normally experience as dysfunctional and unfulfilling" (Goldberg,
1970, pg. 129). The Tavistock conference and later T­groups were, in many respects, the
beginning structures for more emergent forms of learning and laid important groundwork
for what would become the field of organizational development.

It seemed clear to early practitioners that skills of effective human interaction couldn’t be
taught, but rather had to be learned (Harrison, 1996). Prior to the 1950s, there were few,
if any, opportunities to formally participate in process learning/sensitivity training
laboratories. Up until that point, organizational behavior had been observed and
diagnosed, but there was little opportunity to actually practice more functional, effective
interaction.

Over the last two to three decades, it has been increasingly understood that certain skills
of human function and interaction -- listening, inquiry, leadership, role/identity
clarification, awareness of group process, systems thinking, to name but a few -- are best
learned in highly interactive, group settings. Simply put, there is often a considerable gap
between what people believe they should do and how they actually behave, a gap between
espoused values and actual behavior. Early Tavistock conferences and T­groups were an
effort to hold up a mirror to individual participants, to provide an opportunity for the kind
of "double-loop" learning which Chris Argyris believes leads to transformational change.

In essence, it became clear that certain skills could only be deeply learned and integrated
through more emergent, organic group processes. In a typical T­group experience, for
instance, the group initially seeks direction, seeks the comfort of more predictable,
structured learning experiences. No one is quite sure what to do. Particularly for those
unfamiliar with this type of group learning, there is considerable discomfort around the
perceived lack of structure and apparent lack of purpose. "What are we supposed to do?"
is a frequent question posed to the facilitator.

Initially, I think it is vital, in all emergent forms of learning, to provide participants with
as much contextual clarity as possible. In fact, my strong belief is that the more emergeat
the learning experience, the more important it becomes to provide a very clear context. Participants need to understand the deeper contextual purpose of these learning experiences. For many participants, this includes beginning to understand the distinction between “process” and “task.” The vast majority of our learning has been task-directed. We typically are “taught” content. As I have already discussed, most forms of training and development, even in areas such as communication and leadership, have traditionally been content-based and highly directive. Courses are offered which include thick training manuals and extensive lists of do’s and don’ts.

In emergent forms of learning, the process is often the task. In emergent, T-group-type experiences, it is very important that participants understand that the “how” is as important as the “what.” There is a constant invitation (often from the facilitator) to examine self in relation to others and to better understand how to work more cooperatively and democratically as a group. A few additional features and tenets of sensitivity training include:

* Participants sit comfortably in a circle along with the facilitator. No one person takes a formal leadership role, including the facilitator. Much of the learning, in fact, centers around observing the ebb and flow of leadership amongst group members and better understanding the different roles that individuals take on as the group moves into task.

* Sessions usually last between two and three hours and participants typically meet either weekly or bi-weekly. Intensive, all-day “marathon” sessions are not uncommon. These might last anywhere from a day to a week.

* Empathic listening and inquiry is encouraged. When participants become reactive or defensive, the group usually encourages the individual to examine the behavior in question. There is often much initial tension and polarization as the group forms. Over time, though, the group learns how to work through conflict and find common ground through more effective, functional communication.

* Over time, norms develop, leadership emerges, and the group takes on certain identities while pursuing certain tasks. Part of the facilitator’s job is to help the group explicitly examine these dynamics. As participants grow increasingly aware of the impact of
leadership and other group dynamics, they become more functional and effective in their relation to the group.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, T-groups gained much notoriety as a vital and yet controversial organizational intervention (Harrison, 1996). While the organizational development field, as a whole, blossomed and evolved during this time, there were also many T-group failures and abuses of power amongst supposedly trained facilitators. As a movement and as an organizational intervention, T-groups lost much of their momentum in the '80s, despite the continued growth and proliferation of NTL and a handful of other similar training organizations.

While T-groups were losing much of their appeal and perceived utility as a tool for organizational development and transformation, there were other emergent learning structures being birthed. I now turn my attention to examining some of these methodologies, beginning with the dialogue process.

While Tavistock conferences, T-groups and other group learning methodologies were beginning to take form, a quantum physicist named David Bohm was extrapolating from his work in quantum physics in an effort to create a new paradigm of communication amongst human beings. Bohm’s journey into the quantum world led him to believe that what exists at the sub-atomic level isn’t “matter” as we know it, but rather “fields” and “relationships.” For Bohm, this indicated that much of the separation and fragmentation which we experience is largely illusory -- that, in fact, the world is a much more interconnected place than our senses would otherwise indicate.

Bohm believed that one of the important ways to begin bridging and “healing” the fragmentation of thought was for people to enter into dialogue together (Bohm, 1990). The dialogue that Bohm imagined was clearly distinct from the way he saw people typically enter into relationship. Unlike traditional forms of conversation or discussion, where people often try to argue their beliefs or otherwise attempt to convince others of something, Bohm intended the dialogue process to be a starting point for developing a new way of thinking and communicating. Instead of defending positions or even building consensus,
Bohm saw dialogue as a way to start a flow of shared meaning between people. The emphasis moved away from “rightness” and “wrongness” toward “understanding.”

The dialogical container begins with a circle of participants (usually between 10 and 40) who ostensibly come together to talk about whatever is on their mind. Dialogue discourages rigid agendas or prearranged discussion topics. The belief is that whatever is most present, most alive in the “collective consciousness” of the group will emerge in the course of the dialogue. There are no subjects or behaviors (including various non-verbal forms of communication) that are ostensibly off-limits in a dialogue, just a few simple suggestions that may serve as guidelines for the group’s emerging practice.

Initially participants are encouraged to reflect on the mechanisms and structures of their own thinking during the dialogue. What are the assumptions behind our beliefs and our judgments? Notice the assumptions that perhaps contribute to the stories we are telling ourselves about the way things seem to be. What would happen if we began to suspend these assumptions? What would happen if we could metaphorically dangle these assumptions in the air before our eyes so that we may begin to unravel some of these assumptions and beliefs? What effect might this have on the quality of our relationship with others? With ourselves?

By beginning to unravel some of our hallowed certainties and assumptions, both individually and collectively, our dialogue begins to take on a new quality. Instead of seeking “the truth,” we begin exploring deeper structures of thinking. Instead of seeking answers, we embrace questions. And instead of defending our positions or quickly reacting to the beliefs of others, we aspire to shared understanding.

At the core of dialogue are the intrinsically reinforcing practices of listening and inquiry. There is perhaps no skill which is more foundational to the art of dialogue than listening. The feminist writer, Brenda Ueland, best describes this when she offers: “I want to write about the great and powerful thing that listening is. And how we don’t listen to our children, or those we love. And least of all, to those we do not love. But we should. Because listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. You can see that when you think of how the friends who really listen to use are the ones we move toward, and we want to sit in their radius...This is the reason: when we are listened to, it creates us, makes
us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life” (1959, pg. 37).

As we enter into dialogue, our listening becomes more acute and flexible. I ask myself, when I listen, whose meaning am I listening for? I notice my reactions to what I am hearing. I notice my defensiveness. When I feel myself wanting to quickly respond or react, I ask myself, what is it that I’m most responding and reacting to?

I also begin to pay new attention to the questions I am asking and the way I am asking them. How often do I ask questions? When I ask questions, what kind of questions do I ask? Are my questions open and sincere (do they feel like “gifts” which unlock new doors of understanding and discovery)? Or are my questions used to poke and probe (do they feel like “knives” which shut people down and make them defensive)? How can I better learn to ask questions which feel like “gifts?”

It is important to reiterate that dialogue is an ongoing practice, rather than a set of skills or a body of knowledge to acquire. Dialogue, in fact, teaches us that the experience of dialogue means something different to each person who enters the circle. There is no right or wrong way to practice dialogue. There are only practices which seem more or less useful to the individuals within the group.

Similar to the tension which often surfaces in T-groups, one of the great challenges for a facilitator of dialogue is to divest the group of the notion that the dialogue process is about “getting somewhere.” The dialogue is about wherever the group is in the moment. It is about learning how to deeply listen to what is wanting to emerge out of the collective and then having the courage to fully examine this. It is about developing a new set of skills, which might better be called group “sensitivities,” within a highly generative, emergent learning laboratory.

Of all the forms of emergent learning, the dialogue process, as inspired by Bohm, is probably the most emergent and most fluid. There is very little initial structure, and very minimal formal facilitation. Although a facilitator is often useful at the outset to provide context and to keep the group focused on exploring the structures of thought and examining deeply held assumptions, the facilitator role should gradually dissolve as the group gains
skill. The practice of dialogue, as an emergent form of learning, is a model of shared leadership, shared facilitation.

For organizations, there is great added value in developing dialogue competencies. I believe that this value includes:
* reducing fragmentation of thought and enhancing a systems perspective.
* promoting alignment around common vision and purpose.
* facilitating more effective, productive meetings.
* resolving polarities of understanding and thinking which often disable work teams.
* appreciating diversity and the generative thinking that can result from the integration of multiple perspectives.
* increasing the ability to "hold" the tension of different opinions and values, without seeking to quickly resolve this tension, and to experience the creative possibilities which can unfold from this practice.

In 1987, a psychiatrist named M. Scott Peck authored a book entitled, The Different Drum, which outlined his model for a group learning process in which the experience of community is intentionally developed. Like Bohm, Peck believed that humankind was facing a crisis of disconnection. Peck’s early training included extensive work with T-groups and the Quaker meeting model. This experience taught Peck the complexities of group dynamics and encouraged him to further develop a model for building relationships and shared understanding.

Peck’s experience began indicating to him that groups of people seem to move through four distinct stages of development. The stages include: pseudocommunity, chaos, emptiness and community (1987, pg. 86).

While in pseudocommunity, group interaction (at least in the case of new formed groups) has the appearance of pleasant, congenial support, but without the foundation of trust and a more substantive relationship with members of the group, meaningful differences rarely surface. Congeniality is usually superficial and void of substantive exchanges which reflect deeply held beliefs and feelings. Pseudocommunity is often analogous to cocktail party banter – lots of innocuous chit chat and little risk-taking.
As members of a group begin to learn about each other and observe differences of opinion and values, they enter a stage which Peck refers to as chaos. While in chaos, there is considerable projection and attribution of meaning and intentions. Individual differences tend to manifest as polarized positions and antagonisms. People view differences not as invitations to learning and discovery, but rather as antagonisms and personal affronts. Anger, frustration, and disconnection often begin to surface within the group. In chaos, members of a group begin to express strong feelings and beliefs, even if those beliefs are often steeped in unchecked assumptions and attributions.

After mucking around for a while in the throes and pain of chaos, groups have the opportunity to move into a period of emptiness. Emptiness marks the beginning of openness and receptivity to individual differences. Conflict and tension evolve into inquiry and reflection. Emptiness in a group often characterized by reflection and a growing awareness of individual responsibility. Upon entering emptiness, members of a group begin to feel acceptance and tolerance for others. As individuals begin to change and move into community, differences are viewed not as obstacles to relationship but as invitations to shared understanding and dynamic co-creation.

Peck describes the final stage of community as entering “a soft quietness. The room is bathed in a kind of peace” (1987, pg. 103). Trust is high and members of the group grow increasingly vulnerable in what they are willing to share and disclose. Community is usually characterized by authentic sharing of meaningful and often personal stories, followed by periods of respectful silence and sensitive inquiry. Once groups enter into community, their capacity for mutual respect and love and inevitably, for collaboration and co-creation, is deeply heightened.

Like dialogue, Peck’s model for building community is a highly emergent, largely unguided process which can last anywhere from a few hours to a week. A trained facilitator is present and yet his or her job, once again, is to remind members of the task of “building community” and to invite the group to become more aware of its collective behavior and the process which is unfolding. In community building, the group creates its own process, chooses its own themes and develops its own norms. Unlike dialogue, however, where the focus is placed on examining the structure of thought and uncovering
deeply held assumptions, community building is often characterized by the sharing of personal stories -- stories which often involve pain and struggle. In community building, groups tend to focus more on emotions and shared experiences of their vulnerability and "humanness." In dialogue, the focus tends to be more on thought and its relationship to shared action.

Community building, like dialogue, has been used with considerable effectiveness as an organizational intervention, mostly as a tool for improving team cohesiveness and communication.

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Open Space Technology is still another process methodology for emergent, self-organizing learning. The learning methodology was created, to a large extent, as a reflection and extrapolation of Harrison Owen’s experience of village gatherings in West Africa while visiting there in the late 1960s (Owen, 1992). What Owen witnessed in those native, rural villages was a highly evolved and highly efficient process for organizing large scale events. There was little or no formal planning process, a constantly shifting mantle of leadership, and yet the system seemed to work with astonishing effectiveness. No one person or small group of people needed to control the system. Whatever needed to happen at a given time would naturally emerge and then dissolve. The structure was continually reinventing itself in order to serve the most essential needs of the people.

Owen saw in this simple, self-organizing model a few basic organizing principles:
* Initially, there was the fundamental geometry of these gatherings: a circle. Owen found that all West African villages, in fact, were laid out in a circle, with an open space in the middle where villagers could gather. At a deep structural level, Owen believes that the circle is the fundamental geometry of open human communication.
* People would naturally come together around common interests and activities and then would move elsewhere or return to their homes. Owen likened this to a type of group "breathing." Left to their own volition, he witnessed time and time again, a natural kind of "breathing in" of the group followed by a "breathing out."
* Owen also consistently noted the simple, low-tech utility of a community bulletin board as a place where everyone could easily and effectively communicate their needs and wants.
Lastly, Owen also observed, in continual practice, the ancient structure of a central marketplace as a place where people can freely share goods and services.

The presence of a circle, the unencumbered ability to naturally breathe in and out, the community bulletin board and the central marketplace were, for Owen, the primary ingredients for creating what he came to call Open Space Technology (Owen, 1992). In essence, Owen came to believe that within any group of people rests an understanding and a passion for the means by which to meaningfully organize and that this experience of organization was a constantly unfolding, emergent process (also Wheatley, 1996).

Individual purpose and passion were constantly evolving and in this emergent process came a continual reinvention and revitalization of the organization.

The practice field which Owen created to begin exploring this process was a new type of conference using Open Space Technology. Participants come together (usually for between one and three days) in a self-organizing, emergent forum. A short, concise theme is sent out to participants in advance in an effort to "seed the field" with a shared focus.

Upon arrival, participants (usually between 50 and upwards of 500) sit in a circle or in concentric circles. As they are moved to do so, participants come to the center of the circle and speak of their passion/interest (around the theme) in the form of a dialogue they'd like to convene or a workshop they'd like to explore. The speaker then briefly writes this on a piece of paper and posts it on the community bulletin board (one wall is usually filled with sheets of white paper). By posting this passion, the speaker agrees, at least at this point, to take responsibility for scheduling and convening a group around this topic.

Within an hour, a three-day conference agenda and schedule can be efficiently generated -- all without orchestrated facilitation or time-intensive planning committee meetings! At the core of Open Space is the deep-seated belief that groups of people can effectively self-organize around the passions and interests that are most salient to their work and to their lives.

Throughout the event, which functions like an open marketplace of ideas and imaginings, freedom of choice is continually reinforced. Their is only one law and it is referred to as "the law of two feet." Participants are told that if, at any point, they do not feel as though they are contributing to or learning from the particular session they have
chosen to join, then simply move on. Throughout an Open Space conference, breakout sessions continually reconfigure to meet the most essential needs of the participants.

As an organizational intervention, Open Space offers an astonishingly simple structure for generating extraordinary amounts of information. At the end of an Open Space conference, data which the participants have generated and recorded often leads to:

* clarity around shared vision and organizational redirection.
* the formation of self-organizing, self-directed work teams.
* an increased experience and appreciation of community building within the organization.
* a deeper experience of a wide diversity of perspectives and the generative resources which this can offer to an organization.
* an alternative to traditional planning sessions and corporate retreats.

In her book, *Leadership and the New Science*, Margaret Wheatley talks about the free, uninhibited flow of information as the wellspring of a true learning organization. “Information is an organization’s primary source of nourishment; it is so vital to survival that its absence creates a strong vacuum. If information is not available, people make it up. Rumors proliferate, things get out of hand -- all because people lack the real thing. Given the need for constant nourishing information, it is no wonder that ‘poor communication’ inevitably appears so high on the problems list. Employees know it is the critical vital sign of organizational health” (1992, pg. 107).

Open Space Technology offers organizations the opportunity to generate remarkable amounts of new information and in the process of doing so, also builds a deeply invigorated sense of community and collaboration.

The three emergent learning methodologies which I have chosen to profile in this chapter have much in common. At their essence, all three attempt to support the conditions for the unimpeded flow of information amongst groups of people. In this self-organizing, emergent flow of information, participants discover new possibilities for knowing themselves and each other as well as new possibilities for collaboration and co-creation.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that each of the three methodologies profiled is largely a container for the sharing of spoken information.
Over the course of my exploration of different environments for emergent learning, I have become increasingly intrigued by the possibilities for non-verbal communication and learning. The work of Howard Gardner (1993) and others has clearly indicated that different people learn best through a myriad of different learning modalities -- learning mediums which often reflect different types of intelligence (Gardner, 1995).

For instance, we now know that some people are visually-oriented learners (they like to see things written down), while others are auditory or kinesthetic. Within any large grouping of people is a cross-sampling of learning needs and preferences.

Time and time again, I have seen that by offering what I refer to as a multitude of different learning “languages,” the collective learning appears to be richer and deeper.

Over the last year, I have co-designed a number of emergent learning gatherings in which we integrated multiple learning languages into our basic design. These “languages” have usually included a healthy dose of dialogue and the kind of personal storytelling which is reflective of the community building work, but the gatherings have also introduced non-traditional, non-verbal languages as well, including:

* **Playback Theater.** In essence, playback theater uses improvisational drama to literally play back the stories that participants share within the group (Salas, '93; Fox, 1994). Playback provides participants an opportunity to tell a story and then “see” their story come to life through the interpretation of a troupe of trained actors/facilitators. This “language” can be either facilitated (orchestrated exercises) or emergent (spontaneous playback), depending on the needs of the group.

* **Clay.** The use of clay can be a powerful bridge to the unconscious mind as well as offering important metaphors for how we see ourselves and our organizations. As a language, clay can be introduced through orchestrated exercises or can simply be offered to the group as an alternative to verbal dialogue. In the context of a group dialogue, clay will often be used to express thoughts or emotions that are unable or unwilling to be expressed through verbal communication. Because of its primordial quality, clay is particularly useful as a means by which to express archetypal forms. Additionally, clay, as an expressive art medium, usually carries less prior baggage for people than music, dance, or the visual arts. In other words, people usually have less preconceived notions about their talents.
surrounding the use of clay and are therefore better able to communicate important thoughts and feelings through the clay.

* Movement. Helping people get in touch with their bodies (and out of their heads) and begin to observe, though movement and dance, different rhythms and cycles can be tremendously transformational for groups. Again, this language can be facilitated in the form of formal exercises or allowed to simply emerge in the form of more spontaneous physical interaction that serves as an important counter-balance to exclusively verbal communication.

* Drumming. Collective drumming, as both an orchestrated, facilitated experience and also as spontaneous improvisation, can provide groups with a greatly enhanced sense of shared rhythm and shared leadership. Drumming or making music together invites a very different quality of listening to the collective rhythm.

* Sociometry. Within any group of people, there are always invisible webs of connection around shared likes and dislikes, physical attractions and repulsions, values and vision. Based on the research and experimentation of psychiatrist J.L. Moreno (1953), sociometry offers groups a way to make more visible what are typically invisible lines of connection. In essence, participants are asked to form literal webs of connection based on different sets of criteria. Some examples might include: “Place your hand on the person whom you feel is the most natural leader in the group.” “Place your hand on the person from whom you most want to learn.” Out of these invitations to form visual patterns of attraction comes a deeper understanding of our interconnectedness. We can literally start to “see” the ways that we are connected. Sociometry is a powerful tool for emergent learning because it invites a more careful examination of deeper structures of relationship. Again, this learning language can be applied spontaneously or in more carefully guided, facilitated ways.

In this chapter, I have presented a brief smattering of the possible forms and structures for emergent learning. There are many other methodologies and a multitude of alternative learning languages which can help support collaborative, largely self-organizing ways of learning. Two notable methodologies include: Future Search (Weisbord, Janoff, 1995) and Real Time Strategic Change (Jacobs, 1994). I want to be clear, however, in my
conviction that the essence of the emergent learning work is not about a strong attachment to or a dependence on particular forms, but rather a blending and integration of the tools as needed.

I believe it is deeply inconsistent with the spirit of emergent, self-organizing learning to view the forms, themselves, with rigid boundaries. In other words, I think the lines of delineation and distinction between, say “dialogue” and “community building,” are very murky. Where does one methodology begin and another end? To the extent that this work is largely about healing fragmentation and promoting systems thinking, then I believe it is very problematic to become wedded to particular forms.

My work over the last few years has continually reinforced the value of integrating and blending different methodologies in whatever way seems most useful for particular groups of people at particular times. Simply put, if the learning is to remain truly emergent and largely self-organizing than it must continually be in service to the deepest needs of the people. The primary value of emergent learning is to move beyond the forms, themselves, and to focus on the relationships of the people -- what wants to live between them and among them -- to help heal the fragmentation which continually separates rather than connects. The fundamental message of the emergent learning work is that a world of “permanent things” is largely illusory. As David Bohm describes it: “there is separation without separateness” (1996, pg. 76). “Reality” is a constantly shifting, evolving, unfolding process. To better understand and work with this, in all aspects of our lives, we are well-served to focus on the relationships amongst “things” rather than on the things, themselves.

All of which presents a troubling and important paradox. The very act of attempting to articulate and describe different aspects of emergent learning is, in fact, a somewhat fragmenting process. I am reminded again that the act of writing this thesis involves considerable distinction and separation.

In one sense I believe that this separation and distinction is useful in furthering our understanding of the value and applications for emergent learning. I also believe that it is useful, in the context of organizational change efforts and various learning interventions, to draw distinctions between various forms and methodologies. Clearly, there are times when
it is more useful, for example, to use the dialogue process while other occasions will call for something resembling Open Space Technology. I think the real tension rests in our inevitable attachment to the structures, themselves.

As consultants, as teachers, as visionaries bringing this work into the world to help heal the planet, it is quite compelling to believe that our way is the right way, that our tool, whether it be dialogue, community building, or Open Space, is the right tool. The true paradox, of course, particularly for consultants and teachers, is that we need to hang our hat on something. We need to give our clients or our students some sense of what it is we are entering into. And so, we create words to describe something that is mostly intangible, mostly indescribable. And out of those words come models and tools and methodologies. This is natural and understandable and, at times, useful. The dilemma, however, is how to continually attempt to transcend all of this and listen to what is most needed, to listen to what is most wanting to emerge. This, I believe, is what the work is really all about.
I have described, in some depth, what I believe are the important distinctions between structures that support teaching and those that encourage emergent, self-organizing learning. I have articulated the tremendous appeal which “facilitated” and especially “emergent” forms of learning hold for me. I have also described the essential distinctions between various forms and methodologies for emergent learning. All of which now leads to a closer examination of the fundamental question, why? As facilitators, as educators, as catalysts, as change agents, why is it so vital to bring this quality of learning into our organizations? And perhaps, more importantly, what are the skills, the competencies, the quality of relationship that can be developed (in fact, can only be developed) by entering into emergent structures for learning?

As I have said in earlier chapters, I believe that the sustainability of our organizations, and quite possibly the survival of our species, is dependent not on the leadership and the development of a chosen few, but on our collective ability to sense what most needs to happen and then to act on this. Psychologist and author Arnold Mindell offers: “The idea of there being a best leader must die, because it takes away the responsibility and awareness of what needs to be done by each individual. The idea of a great leader is crippling because the real leader is any individual, anywhere, anytime, who is aware of the type of process trying to happen and who makes room for it to happen” (1992, pg. 129).

In their essay on building “communities of commitment,” Peter Senge and Fred Kofman quote a group called “Ghandhis of the world” in their definition of new leadership: “Our times are increasingly characterized by the awakening of the human force all over the planet, expressing itself in popular movements, grassroots communities and local organizations. This world force is a new kind of leadership capable of synthesizing the
expressions of groups and organizing for action. Leadership from and of the group -- and from the least among us -- is the hope for change in our time” (1995, pg. 34).

This thinking represents a marked contrast to traditional organizational structures which equate strong leadership with hierarchy, authority and considerable control. Collaborative leadership, in a culture which has traditionally sought heroes and saviors in the form of charismatic leaders, is a substantial paradigm shift.

The basic contract of the industrial age, says management consultant Peter Block, has been “an exchange of sovereignty for security” (keynote address, 1995 Systems Thinking in Action conference). For decades, employees traded their autonomy in exchange for job security. Most American workers were fully aware that they exercised very little genuine leadership within the workplace. The lines of demarcation were very clear between management and labor, supervisors and workers. Authority was largely unquestioned. Hierarchy was accepted. As long as the company was profitable, as long as the paycheck kept coming, the worker was largely satisfied with the contract.

In the modern era of downsizing, re-engineering and unprecedented global business competition, the basic contract of the industrial age has been largely rendered null and void. The American worker can no longer expect job security, can no longer expect their organization to “caretake” and protect.

Instead, the new contract demands an unprecedented range of work skills coupled with strong initiative, flexibility and self-management in order to function amidst a perpetually changing and shrinking organization. The American worker has never enjoyed more freedom, more autonomy, more opportunity for initiative and creativity within the workplace. The hard edge, of course, is that contemporary organizations offer little or no job security.

A new understanding of leadership is required, one that is captured, in part, by management consultant Mike McMaster when he says: “Management now refers to the design and practices which enable the self-organising intelligence of people in community (team or group) to generate their own learning and action’ (Learning-Org on-line discussion).
While most of today’s leading-edge organizations are seeking to develop high-performance teams, few organizations understand the deeper dynamics that promote the quality of shared, organic leadership which Mindell and McMaster describe. Robert Greenleaf (1977) calls this new type of leadership “servant leadership.” He believes that the highest leverage leaders within any organization are those individuals whose leadership reflects a deep sense of service to the organization. For Greenleaf, true leadership is all about service to the collective good.

More recently, Joseph Jaworski (1996) speaks of “generative” leadership. Our traditional orientation around effective leadership, says Jaworski, is grounded in a prescribed set of “leadership actions.” The belief, throughout much of the industrial age, is that leadership skills can be identified, measured and taught. Jaworski, on the other hand, believes that the leadership which is most needed in contemporary organizations is reflected in who the leader is, rather than what he or she does. Says Jaworski: “The capacity to discover and participate in our unfolding future has more to do with our being -- our total orientation of character and consciousness -- than with what we do. Leadership is about creating, day to day, a domain in which we and those around us continually deepen our understanding of reality and are able to participate in shaping the future. This, then, is the deeper territory of leadership -- collectively ‘listening’ to what is wanting to emerge in the world, and then having the courage to do what is required” (1996, pg. 182).

It is my belief that while traditional methods of team-building and other skill-based training programs may form necessary foundations, there is a need for increasingly sophisticated collaborative skills, what might be termed "advanced group sensitivities" and "practices." It is these sensitivities, this deepening understanding of how to generatively lead and serve, that will enable the corporations of tomorrow to truly function as pre-eminent learning organizations, to continually invent and re-invent.

I believe there is a developmental point at which teams go beyond the measurable skills and knowledge that they share and move into a deeper, often tacit level of attunement and alignment. It is at this level of attunement that teams are most generative, most productive. When teams enter into this state, there is great potential for synchronicity (Jaworski, 1996). Information and understanding flows naturally. The quality of listening becomes very
acute. What most needs to happen is decisively identified and the people who are best suited for particular leadership roles fluidly move into action.

Most organizational leaders believe that these "flow" experiences, these periods of finely tuned connection, happen largely by circumstance. It is my belief that this deep level of attunement is a quality of relationship and communication that can be intentionally developed within teams.

As Jaworski says, generative leadership cannot be taught insomuch as it is learned. Generative leadership is not only about "doing" but also about "being." At all stakeholder levels, it is about listening to what is wanting to emerge within the organization and then having the courage to take decisive action.

As I have reiterated throughout this thesis, today's organizations are characterized by considerable complexity, ambiguity and at times, chaos. Leaders who develop generative leadership skills are able to remain centered amidst this shifting sea of uncertainty and systemic complexity. These leaders are continually learning, adapting and creating. They are able to see previously unseen possibility and human potential within organizations. They also begin to ask new questions: How can I better understand the whole system and how can I begin to see deeper patterns of interrelatedness? What are some of the multiple and, at times, paradoxical scenarios which I might imagine unfolding over time within this organization? What is happening in this moment that I need to understand in order to serve the deepest needs of my organization? How I can learn to view human systems with the same degree of concern that I have understood technological systems?

When I ask these questions, I begin to develop a new relationship to "information." As a leader, I begin to understand that the most essential data which I need to access is the knowledge which resides in this moment within the stakeholders of the organization. In fact, all I can ever truly begin to access is what's happening in the present (Wheatley, 1996). The "purpose" of the organization -- the mental models which guide action -- can never be mandated over a period of time, but rather is manifested in a network of people in an emergent process. Purpose and vision shifts constantly. It is never static, no matter how much we might wish it to be. As a leader, the question becomes, how can I better learn to access the organic, in-the-moment wisdom and understanding within my
organization? And how can I then use that information to better understand what is actually happening in my organization and what is also most wanting to happen? We have become very skillful at managing information systems and accessing sophisticated forms of technology and yet we often fail to tap our most vital and current information resources -- the people with whom we serve and lead.

Again, I term these emerging skills "advanced group sensitivities." I believe they include:

* reducing fragmentation of thought and enhancing a systems perspective through shared dialogue.
* inquiry and deep listening as generative tools for responding to organizational needs.
* developing the ability to read and intuit the needs of stakeholders, including verbal and non-verbal language -- what might also be called "sensing the field."

It is this last skill which is the most nebulous and ambiguous and yet perhaps the most essential. Returning again to Greenleaf's notion of servant leadership, the leader is continually attuned to how to be in better service to the organization. This is what I might describe as "sensing the field" -- paying attention not only to what is clearly "within the lines" (what can be readily measured and observed within an organization) but also paying attention to what is "between the lines" (that which is largely intuited and sensed and then inquired into).

As a servant leader, this skill of "sensing the field" also includes paying careful attention to the "margins" of an organization. As leaders, our attention is typically focused on what is happening at the "center" of our organization. As we increase our capacity for generative leadership, we become more aware of what is also happening in the margins, what is happening "off-center." Who are the people who feel isolated? Ostracized? Underappreciated? Underdeveloped? As a leader, I come to realize that what is happening on the margins, left unchecked, will come to impact what is happening in the center of my organization. How can I better learn to see the whole system? How can I better learn to support "integration" and "collaboration" within the system, rather than "fragmentation" and "isolation?"
As we identify these skills as essential to building the capacity for generative leadership, the question remains, how do we develop them? It is my strong belief that the skills aren't taught, but rather learned. As I have said before, most training and development remains a structure for teaching. Building the capacity for generative leadership is about creating structures for learning.

I refer again to the "cycle of progressive learning" which I first introduced in Chapter One. Moving from "structured learning" to "facilitated learning" to "emergent learning," I strongly believe that the whole cycle is equally important. As I previously indicated, we all need teachers to present their knowledge to us and we all need to have our learning guided (and yet our input valued) by more experienced "experts" and we all need to understand and experience the enormous generative possibilities for genuinely collaborative, largely self-organizing learning.

It is my belief, however, that the emergent learning experiences are the real practice fields for developing advanced group sensitivities and for developing the capacity for generative leadership. T-groups, Dialogue, Community Building, Open Space Technology and various, hybrid methodologies serve as essential developmental tools.

I refer to these emergent learning laboratories as practice fields because I see the development of advanced group sensitivities and the capacity for generative leadership as an ongoing practice. We are always learning, always developing, always discovering.

Even within the burgeoning field of organizational learning, there are relatively few opportunities to develop and practice new sensitivities within emergent learning laboratories. Much of the work which is at the forefront of this field remains largely mired in more familiar forms of "structured" and "facilitated" learning. New frontiers of collaboration, co-creation and shared leadership remain largely untapped.

The proliferation of "dialogue groups" throughout the world offers one of the most important opportunities to practice "listening" for emergent understanding and to explore and share subtle forms of generative leadership. As I indicated before, most dialogue groups (at least at some point in their evolution) offer the opportunity for shared facilitation, for evolving, unfolding leadership. In its purest form, the dialogue process offers a powerful experience of emergent learning.
Over the last three years, the most vital practice field which I have discovered for developing group sensitivities and building the capacity for generative leadership has been the work of Sheryl Erickson and the Turning Point Foundation, a non-profit organization which was first created in order to connect like-minded practitioners of Peter Senge’s Fifth Discipline learning organization model. Over time, the Turning Point Foundation’s primary function has been to explore and develop a deeper, experiential understanding of the collaborative, creative process.

During the last five years, several collaborative “learning gatherings” have been created throughout the United States and have attracted participants from around the world. Whereas traditional conferences use “experts” to present a foundation of knowledge and breadth of understanding, the Bretton Woods gatherings, as they are called, are intended to be learning laboratories where participants come, as teachers and learners together, to share in experiential exploration of the collaborative, creative process. The gatherings have offered an opportunity for groups of committed, passionate people (most of whom are either consultants to or practitioners within organizations) to explore for several days the spirit and the essence of what it means to actually be a learning community — how to embody and integrate rather than simply understand the principles and practices of collaborative, organizational learning.

Over time, those of us who have been deeply engaged in this exploration have begun to identify some of the practices that we feel are essential to becoming a learning organization. These practices include: listening, inquiry, dialogue, collaborative storytelling and the creation of shared rituals for learning.

As I indicated in an earlier chapter, the intention of the Bretton Woods gatherings is not to create an egalitarian structure, but rather to truly enable a shared learning experience where each person is fully able to weave their natural talents and gifts into the collective. Certain individuals clearly serve as catalysts for certain elements of the gathering. Some of this learning, in fact, may be “structured” and/or “facilitated,” but the real essence of the experience is an intentional exploration of generative leadership and the collaborative process.
The gatherings begin by building a container, a "practice field" if you will, where collaborative learning through many mediums can be experienced. A group of designated stewards/provocateurs/facilitators comes with a “toolbox” full of practices and "languages" which is drawn upon in order to build the container for wholeness, safety and a deep sense of community. This, I believe, is the necessary foundation on which generative leadership rests.

As provocateurs and catalysts, we introduce these languages and practices as we sense they are most needed, in the moment, to tell the stories that want and need to be told in order to build the container. It's always a fluid, largely unplanned interweaving of such "languages" as the dialogue process, Playback Theatre, dance, drumming, sociometry, storytelling, clay, non-verbal interaction, and so on.

As I indicated, the languages are introduced as they are most needed. We are continually sensing and reading the field, sensing what might be offered to most enable the container to be built for wholeness (a whole body experience), safety and a sense of community. It is important to emphasize that the various "languages" should not serve as intellectual showpieces, nor should they be inappropriately introduced if the group isn't ready. We don't want to highlight the tool or the exercise or the model. The clear intention in this work is for the tool or the "language" to serve and enable, in a seamless manner, what naturally wants to emerge out of the collective.

In my mind, it is this element of the work which largely distinguishes the Bretton Woods work from other conferences, workshops and retreats, even in the organizational learning field. We don't arrive with a planned process or program. Without question, we come equipped with a well-honed toolbox, yet always we are “sensing the field,” sensing what is most wanting and needing to happen within this particular collective of people.

This is the essential feature of stewarding/facilitating self-organizing, emergent learning. Every group of people presents us with a different field, a different set of needs, different suitcases filled with emotional baggage and assumptions, and different expectations about what they are entering into. Always, we build the container by working with what is there, in the moment, in the field, and yet, there is always the need to build the container if the really essential work is to begin.
This is the tension, the paradox we must always balance. We must continually sense the field, work with the joy, the pain, the resistance, the inspiration that is there and we still need to offer a wide diversity of practices and languages if we are to build the container for maximum creativity and emergent possibility.

I have always imagined this work as involving two phases, two cycles. The phases are not, in any way, clearly distinct, nor linear, and yet, the first part of the process clearly enables what for me is the most exciting and truly innovative aspect of this work.

In essence, building the container for wholeness, safety and a sense of community is a necessary first step. Clearly, there are many different ways to build a container for safety and trust and a sense of connectedness. It is my assumption that the reason we try to introduce, as stewards, as many different languages as possible is to enable the collective to experience the possibilities for shared meaning in many different forms and in many different places in the body. There is a greater depth and deeper integration of experience in the container when a number of different languages and ways of learning together are introduced.

Once the container has been built (the first phase), then the work which I believe is most deeply relevant to organizations can begin. Simply put, the question becomes, once the container has been built for wholeness, what then wants to emerge? What is the group able to co-create that it couldn’t create before? For me, the reason we build the container in the first place is not simply to give people a taste of collaborative, emergent learning but rather to birth something new, something that can only be birthed out of that collective of people in that particular field of inquiry and practice. This is the essence of generative leadership.

There seems to be so much waiting to be born out of a container built for wholeness, safety, creativity and, most of all, emergence. A new understanding of leadership, stewardship, shared vision, systems thinking as well as very concrete, practical inventions and discoveries.

And so, once the container has been built, the question remains, what are the next steps toward the practical manifestation of these new skills and "sensitivities," these new ways of learning together in organization?
One way to do this, I have discovered, is through the use of a hybrid form of Open Space Technology, what I have dubbed “Emergent Space.” In the next chapter, I describe, in considerable depth, some of the necessary considerations of readiness and receptivity around these learning processes. I also offer what I believe is a complete developmental process for developing generative leadership within an organization. At this point, however, I want to further articulate the possibilities for developing advanced group sensitivities and building the capacity for generative leadership through the use of “Emergent Space.”

The idea of “Emergent Space” is that once a group has spent some time together exploring different learning languages and once a degree of community has been formed, then the question becomes, how does this preliminary work influence and impact what the group now is able to create together?

Open Space Technology, as was discussed in the last chapter, is a methodology for surfacing and examining some of the shared interests and passions within a collective of people. In essence, it is an open marketplace of ideas. It provides participants with tremendous freedom to create small and large group dialogues around various topics of interest and to move in and out of these groupings in a fluid, self-organizing manner.

Similarly, “Emergent Space” provides the same opportunity for self-organization around shared passions and interests. The difference, however, is the use of sociometry to further ascertain where the collective energy and interest resides as well as a constant “breathing out” and “breathing back in” through each iteration of the process.

I offer an example for illustration. At a recent Bretton Woods gathering in Lake Mohonk, New York (1995), the group spent three days together building shared meaning through the use of many learning languages, including dialogue, sociometry, Playback Theatre, clay, drumming and long hikes. On the fourth morning, the group seemed ready to go to the next level, to more fully explore their collective, creative capacity in light of the experience of the first three days.

The group came together in a circle and were invited to start generating a list of passions and interests which “emerged” out of the previous three days of learning. Once a list was generated, the group was then asked to stand and form a sociometric “web” around these
shared interests by each person placing a hand on the person whose passion, in this moment, is most aligned with his or her own interest.

After the web has formed, natural groupings of people emerge. These self-organizing groupings of people then enter into dialogue or some other form of communication for a given period of time (usually 2-3 hours). This might be referred to as “breathing out,” i.e. various groupings within the collective break into small subsets of the collective in order to explore topics or areas of interests that have real energy for that particular grouping.

At the end of a given period of time, the group then “breathes back in,” i.e. the large group once again re-forms into a circle. This is the most essential feature of Emergent Space and what largely distinguishes this methodology from Open Space Technology.

In Open Space Technology, there are usually several iterations of self-organizing breakout sessions before returning to the large circle to check the pulse of the group and to see what is now wanting to emerge.

In Emergent Space, the group is continually “breathing out” and “breathing back in” after each iteration to see what is wanting to emerge next. It is my strong belief that this allows the collective an opportunity to go deeper into its collaborative, creative process and to more fully experience and develop generative leadership.

I also believe that the Emergent Space work is maximally generative only on the heels of having built a container for wholeness, safety, and a deep sense of community. In other words, I don't believe that we can simply start by inviting emergence. For instance, at the New York gathering which I used as an example, it would have been difficult to start with the Emergent Space process on Wednesday morning without spending the time building the container during the previous three days.

How do we know when the container has been sufficiently built in order to begin emergent space? In the next chapter, I look more deeply at this question in the context of the larger question of developmental readiness. At this point, though, I offer the simple answer that there is no formula, no tried and true process. We can only sense the field and then inquire.

Again, I reiterate, these elements, these phases of a collaborative learning gathering are in no way distinct. In other words, we are always building the container. We don’t stop
building the container once we begin to enter Emergent Space. Likewise, the experience of building the container for Emergent Space is, itself, an emergent process. There is some facilitation, some structure, but always, as stewards and catalysts of this process, we are sensing the field, sensing what is most needed within this particular collective.

The Bretton Woods learning laboratories, including the Emergent Space process, is but one tangible way to develop and practice advanced group sensitivities and to build the capacity for generative leadership. There are inevitably many other methods and practices.

In his book, Synchronicity: the Inner Path of Leadership, Joe Jaworski is clear in his assertion that the road to organizational transformation begins with individual transformation. And individual transformation begins with a shift of consciousness.

Noted “dialogue” facilitator and consultant, Glenna Gerard, recently offered the following description of her work: “Many of the people I work with come with the intention of teambuilding, community building, building shared vision, creating collective learning, seeking breakthroughs in creative problem solving, conflict resolution, leadership development. Yes. These are all available. But they are the by products of transformational experiences. My calling is to keep my eye focused always on the state of consciousness that is the source of transformation and create entryways for myself and others” (1996, “Synchronicity and Generative Leadership on-line dialogue seminar”).

Clearly, there are many paths toward personal transformation. As I have reiterated throughout this thesis, I think it is important to avoid the trap of believing that there is a “right” way. There are many practices, many individual (and collaborative) disciplines which help spark a shift of consciousness that can lead to deeper awareness and sensitivity.

I am reminded again of Milton Erickson’s model for change. We typically try to leverage change at the belief level, but, in fact, we are most effective in changing beliefs by changing the context which leads to a change in perception which leads to a change in behavior which then leads to a change in beliefs.

As I seek to create new contexts in which to spark a new consciousness in others, I am continually mindful of the profound words of Mahatma Gandhi, who said: “We must be the change we wish to see in the world” (source undetermined).

As we seek to transform organizations, we begin by transforming ourselves.
CHAPTER FIVE
AN ORGANIZATIONAL INTERVENTION

As generative leadership is developed through emergent forms of learning, there are several questions which naturally surface regarding developmental readiness. It is vital to acknowledge that the capacity (as well as the inclination) for developing these skills and sensitivities is widely variable amongst individuals.

One of the primary tenets of emergent learning is the importance of meeting people where they are. As I have indicated before, within any group of people, there are many different learning styles, many different learning needs and a vast array of assumptions, filters and intentions that need to be accommodated or, at least, acknowledged. The great value of emergent structures for learning is that the learning container is shaped by the participants, themselves. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that this type of collaborative learning experience is met with variable degrees of enthusiasm, or, conversely, with variable degrees of resistance.

There are a myriad of reasons why individuals might resist emergent containers for learning. For many, there continue to be deep attachments to traditional forms of "teaching." There is an undeniable security and familiarity in the predictability of "structured" and "facilitated" forms of learning. When we invite emergence, we invite not only the creative, generative parts of ourselves, but also the "shadow" side -- those undesirable parts of ourselves that we may not wish to confront. Emergent learning containers often thrust us into a murkiness of relationship that can be deeply unsettling. We work through the muck with the hope that something powerful can be birthed.

Developing generative leadership through emergent learning presents many dilemmas and paradoxes, especially within organizations. On one level, as I have indicated before, it is very difficult to effectively measure and assess the impact of emergent learning interventions. Most organizations still want to see immediate, short-term, observable
results of organizational development interventions (particularly when they are paying thousands of dollars in consulting fees).

Peter Senge is quick to point out that the roots of the word "measure" are the same as the sanskrit word "maya," which means "illusion" (Bretton Woods Gathering of Active Practitioners, 1994). Much of the attachment to measurement and assessment which so characterizes most organizations is reflective of a desire to control and predict behavior in ways that are largely illusory. As we learn more about systems dynamics and systems thinking, we realize that it is virtually impossible to isolate and fragment the impact of a particular learning intervention, particularly when that intervention surrounds the improvement of organizational generativity and collaboration.

Developing the skills and sensitivities which build the capacity for the kind of generative leadership I have been describing throughout this thesis demands a considerable commitment of time and resources. We would not expect to learn Chinese or calculus, for instance, over the course of a three-day workshop and yet traditionally, organizations have expected brief training sessions to have transformational impact. I don’t believe this is a reasonable expectation when we are seeking to fundamentally shift our paradigms around how we might collaborate and create together. Developing advanced group sensitivities is very comparable to learning a new language. It demands ongoing attention and practice.

We face another dilemma as we seek to develop the capacity for generative leadership. How does one effectively assess the present capacity of individuals within a given organization? Who is receptive to this? Who isn’t? What would it take to create a safe enough and supportive enough environment to begin developing these skills and sensitivities?

And furthermore, as consultants, how do we assess organizational readiness? And might this “advanced” level of organizational development be more appropriate, more needed, in one type of organization rather than another? How might one assess this “need?”

On some very basic level, it seems clear that helping an organization develop advanced group sensitivities and build the capacity for generative leadership should be reflective of a clear willingness and recognition from within the organization. Philip Davidson, executive
vice-president of Signet Bank and a visionary champion of organizational learning, talks about the notion of “adjacency” (Bretton Woods Gathering of Active Practitioners, 1996). As practitioners of alternative and progressive forms of teaching and learning, Davidson believes that we have a heightened need to continually keep our work “adjacent” to the needs of the people whom we seek to serve. Although emergent forms of learning are designed to serve the collective needs of a group and continually reinforce freedom of choice, these learning structures can nonetheless be introduced and utilized in very inappropriate and ineffective ways. Or, as Davidson often warns, this work runs the risk of being “not adjacent” to the people we seek to serve.

The question becomes, how do we assess “adjacency?” How do we assess an individual’s (or an organization’s) readiness and capacity for generative leadership? How do we know when it is appropriate to introduce emergent structures for learning? How do we interpret and work with resistance?

As I said before, it is extremely difficult to assess the causality of resistance. Resistance might be a reflection of the consultant’s (or other change agent’s) ineffective intervention and/or facilitation. It might be the result of a lack of contextual clarity. As I indicated in an earlier chapter, I believe that the more emergent the container for learning, the more critical it becomes for the facilitator/provocateur to provide a crystal clear context for why we are doing this and what the expected value of this experience might be.

As organizations become increasingly encumbered by the demands of the contemporary workplace, there is generally less patience for learning interventions that are perceived as irrelevant to the functional needs of the organization. As employees experience more stress and increasing demands on their time and energy, they seek learning experiences that provide genuine value and enable them to become more effective in the work they do.

It is through this lens that I am mindful of how I begin to help organizations transform and how I begin to nurture the capacity for generative leadership and develop advanced group sensitivities.

Although organizations are under increasing pressure to perform at extraordinarily high levels of “task,” there is also increasing awareness of the importance of effective “process.” As I repeatedly stressed in earlier chapters, organizations are realizing, in a time of
unparalleled, precipitous change, that traditionally hierarchal ways of leading and managing are no longer functional. Highly developed “relational,” collaborative skills are essential to evoke maximum creativity, adaptability and initiative.

And yet, as I said earlier, within every organization is a wide mix of skills and orientations. Simply put, some people seem inclined toward developing collaborative learning skills while others remain resistant. Some individuals see only the need to complete business “tasks,” while others see the business value in examining underlying processes and relationships. There are many explanations for these differences of orientation. Many psychological/personality assessment models have been created to better understand these different ways of relating to each other and to our environment. Two particularly popular assessment tools include Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Hirsh and Kummerow, 1989) and Human Dynamics (Seagal and Horne, 1995).

While I believe that assessment/diagnostic “tools” can be useful in supporting the developmental process (by making more visible that which is often invisible), we also need to continually be mindful of the traps of seeking to quickly “diagnose” and label individuals, particular those who we see as obstacles to our change efforts. We need to continually seek wholeness and collective understanding rather than fragmentation and separation if our objective is true generative leadership. To the extent that individuals feel labeled and “boxed,” we may do more to actually promote organizational dysfunction and fragmentation rather than diminish it.

Regardless of how we choose to “measure” individual (and organizational) capacity and orientation, this much seems clear: despite the enormous transformative value of emergent structures for learning, we need to be very conscious of when and how we introduce these forms into an organization. As consultants, change agents and educators, I believe that we are generally ill-advised to begin transformational learning processes at the emergent end of the cycle.

In returning again to the cycle of progressive learning, I believe it is usually necessary to offer some “teaching” and “facilitation” before inviting an organization into more emergent structures for learning.
Herein rests another paradox. It is clear that transformational change — enabling substantial shifts of consciousness — is not a developmental formula that can be mapped out with any real certainty. There is no certain method for enabling the shifts of consciousness necessary to lay the seeds for developing advanced group sensitivities and building the capacity for generative leadership.

This said, I believe that the cycle of progressive learning is a functional model for enabling transformational change. What would this look like as an organizational intervention? I offer the following, not as a rigid formula, but rather as a suggested process for enabling sustainable, transformational change and developing generative leadership:

As I indicated in the last chapter, I believe that organizational transformation begins with individual transformation. Individual transformation starts with a shift of consciousness. The initial entry into any organization begins with the intention of helping individuals see new possibilities for relationship (both with self and others) and, out of this, new possibilities for organizational regeneration.

I label the beginnings of this individual transformation as gathering data and seeding the field.

Depending on the size of the organization, the consultant engages with as many individuals as possible in what I term “dialogical conversations.” In small organizations, the consultant seeks to enter into conversation with each individual entering into the change process. In larger organizations, this sampling would include high potential leaders, preferably those leaders who have emerged organically over time and who have been widely identified by their peers as high leverage leaders (Jaworski, 1996).

This process resembles, in certain respects, what might traditionally be called “intake” and “evaluation,” but is distinct in both tone and intention. These dialogical conversations are, in essence, interviews that last between one to three hours. These conversations have three central purposes:

1) Gather data. Through informal inquiry, the consultant attempts to ascertain the needs, wants and orientations of those individuals who make up the system. The consultant also
asks questions that are intended to glean individual perceptions of the organization. What seems to be working? What isn’t? What are the business issues most at the center of change within this organization? How effectively does this organization learn together? How do you view your leadership role? What is your vision of the future of this organization? What needs to happen next?

These conversations also help to offer some indication of the individual’s interpersonal and “process” skill level. For example, does this individual take ownership of his perceptions of the organization or is he continually attributing and projecting his beliefs onto the entire system? Does this individual seem to be inquiring into his own thinking? Does this individual seem deeply entrenched in his beliefs? How does he listen? How does he react?

2) Build relationship. By entering into in-depth conversations/dialogues with a broad cross-section of individuals within the organization (in which the consultant also shares his or her imaginings and beliefs regarding the learning they hope to engender), they begin, together, to establish a shared understanding of their different objectives, hopes and needs. The consultant and client also begin to develop mutual trust and a sense of shared context and purpose (namely, improving the functioning of the organization). Developing a clear rapport and understanding through these initial one-on-one sessions helps lay vital groundwork for building support and participation.

3) Model skills. As I indicated in the previous chapter, one of the highest leverage points for enabling behavioral change is to model desired behavior. As the consultant enters into relationship with individuals in the organization, he or she continually models many of the behaviors and skills which I believe are most essential to developing generative leadership, including: empathic listening, open inquiry, seeing through multiple perspectives, examining deeply held assumptions, etc. These initial, dialogical conversations provide a potentially powerful opportunity to introduce a new way of entering into conversation, of being in relationship. These conversations help plant important seeds for nurturing the spirit of generative dialogue within an organization.

Again, though, it is important to acknowledge that there are many different reactions to these dialogical conversations within a given organization. These reactions are grounded in
many different assumptions and orientations. For some, there is a profound mistrust of outsiders and of consultants, in particular, while for others, one-on-one dialogue may provide a unique opportunity for authentic sharing and self- (as well as organizational-) examination. And still for others, particularly for those not oriented toward verbal communication, the process may have little meaning or value altogether.

Nonetheless, I believe that these dialogical conversations provide an important and meaningful first step into an organization. These interventions provide an effective means for gleaning substantial amounts of vital information while building relationship and providing context.

After engaging as many individuals as possible in dialogical conversations, the consultant then turns his or her attention toward explicitly identifying skills and competencies. As I indicated, the dialogical conversations help surface the skills and competencies that are most needed within a given organization. The dialogical conversations, in part, become a tool which helps the consultant co-design, along with individuals from within the organization, the teaching and learning environments that will support the development of the skills most relevant to this organization’s transformational change needs. As I have repeatedly reiterated throughout this thesis, I believe that learning is more integrated and internalized when participants are able to take ownership of their learning by helping to identify and co-design the structures and practices that best support their needs. As an external change agent for learning, the consultant makes suggestions regarding the skills which he or she believes are most needed, and yet, I think it is essential that this process be undertaken in partnership with the organization.

Another way to begin identifying the skills that will help enable transformational change is through the use of Open Space Technology. In essence, individuals from throughout the organization are invited to come together for a two-day Open Space conference around the following theme: what are the skills that are most important in leading this organization into the future? Open Space Technology, as a tool for identifying skills and competencies, assumes that individuals from throughout an organization already have many thoughts about the skills which are most needed in order to lead their organization. Open Space invites participants to share these mental models within the collective and to
begin examining, through small-group and large-group dialogues, the skills and practices which the collective identifies as most essential.

The first day of Open Space involves identifying the skills and practices that support leading the organization into a shared future. The second day features a shared dialogue around the learning design that would best support the development of these skills. The Open Space event also serves the purpose of identifying key business issues which serve as ongoing areas of focus and learning throughout the organization’s change process.

While I believe it is vital, whenever possible, to share in the identification of skills and practices that support the development of generative leadership, it is also important not to mitigate the knowledge and experience which the consultant brings to the organization. I return again to the model of “unconscious incompetence,” “conscious incompetence,” “conscious competence,” and “unconscious competence.” Often, individuals from within an organization “don’t know what they don’t know.” And so, while it is important to invite their feedback in order to fully engage them in the learning process, it is also important to acknowledge that the consultant/facilitator often needs to introduce and catalyze, at least initially, new skills into the learning field.

Once foundational skills and competencies have been identified, along with the consultant’s input, then the question becomes how to most effectively introduce these basic process skills. I reiterate again that these skills serve as building blocks for developing the advanced group sensitivities which I have previously identified. A sampling of the foundational skills would most likely include:

* recognizing the distinction between “process” and “task.”
* listening (both empathic listening and listening for multiple levels of meaning).
* inquiring into deeper assumptions and mental models (both my own and others).
* holding the paradox of different beliefs (without seeking to quickly resolve this tension).
* basic dialogue skills, including taking ownership of my beliefs and emotions (using “I” statements rather than projecting and attributing meaning).
* systems thinking (beginning to see deeper levels of cause and effect relationship throughout the system).
The skills are introduced through workshops (lasting between two to four days depending on the needs, orientations and size of the organization). Using both "structured" learning (teaching) and "facilitated" learning (guided, interactive exercises and opportunities to practice), this initial series of workshops provides a basic foundation in process skill development and team building/organizational learning. (As I have mentioned before, most training and development programs within organizations begin and end with this level of skill development).

As much as possible, basic skills should be developed in the context of (and in connection to) core business issues which participants have previously identified. In other words, when presenting illustrative examples or when introducing experiential exercises, the facilitator should remain continually mindful of the need for "adjacency" — of connecting "process" skills to relevant business "tasks."

After foundational skills have been introduced, individuals need further opportunity to practice and integrate the skills while also building relationships and developing community within the organization. This would include significant blocks of time (preferably two to four days) for open dialogue/community building around topics and issues of the groups choosing. During this time, participants would have an opportunity to practice some of the foundational process skills while also being invited to reflect on their own mental models, assumptions and behavior around organizational relationships as they move through the stages of building community. As I described in chapter two, the facilitator’s role during this process is mostly to bring attention to process and to raise questions which are helpful for increasing collective awareness. As the facilitator seeks to develop advanced group sensitivities and build the capacity for generative leadership, his or her role as "interventionist"/learning catalyst should intentionally dissipate.

As the group moves into the process of building community, the primary role of the consultant should be to "hold the space." Holding space is about a mindfulness and awareness of how the learning container is being supported, i.e. being sensitive to group energy, being aware of what is happening on the "margins" as well as at the "center." It is also about bringing a quality of attention (or rather attunement) to that which is wanting to
emerge. Dialogue facilitator, Glenna Gerard, describes this as “the creation of a space that is empty, or perhaps one could say that it is filled with nothing other than listening. It awaits that which will show itself and ask for shaping” (1993).

Another way of framing the facilitator’s capacity to “hold space” is to see this as a different relationship to power and authority. In traditional forms of teaching and facilitation, the consultant/facilitator tends to “draw” attention and, as a result, gathers considerable (albeit often unconscious) power. Simply put, the traditional model of teaching and training places the consultant at the “center” of the organizational intervention rather than at the “edge.”

As we seek to develop the capacity for generative leadership, it is essential that the consultant gather power in order to disperse it -- and that he or she continually practice and model this capacity for “holding space.” Generative leadership, as I have reiterated throughout this thesis, is about empowering the collective to “listen” for what is most needed, for what is most wanting to emerge, and then having the courage to take action. Creating “practice fields” for developing the capacity for generative leadership is based on a model of shared, “leaderful” facilitation. It is inconsistent with traditional, patriarchal forms of teaching and learning.

In fact, I believe that one of the important “tasks” for the facilitator as “space holder” is to continually invite the group to examine its own relationship to power, authority and control. This, for me, is essential terrain that needs to be explored while building community and developing advanced group sensitivities. For most organizations, issues of power, authority and control are terrifying undiscussables. These dynamics reflect some of our most deeply held mental models about ourselves and our relationships to others. We become extremely vulnerable as we confront profound questions about our capacity to serve and lead. Am I worthy enough and capable enough to share in the leadership of this organization? How can I safely communicate to others the vulnerabilities and insecurities which I sometimes feel? How can I express my deepest needs? And how can I express my concerns and frustrations about the way I feel treated within this organization?
And herein lies another foundational paradox. I cannot express my deepest truths about myself or my most authentic observations of the organization until I feel safe. And I cannot feel safe until I take risks and build trust.

The process of building community through open dialogue and inquiry is intended to develop this safety and trust -- with practice, over time. It is about building a container (which hopefully expands to include the entire organization) where information of all kinds can flow freely and where genuine inquiry and empathic listening are continually practiced.

The facilitator, as “space holder,” helps to create a “safe space” for learning, mostly by modeling desired behaviors. By surfacing his or her own deeply held assumptions, by sharing authentic (and, at times, vulnerable) observations, the facilitator seeks to support a learning container where past undiscussables can be surfaced and explored.

Community develops to the extent that organizations continually “hold the space” for this quality of dialogue to happen. While “facilitated” retreats and workshops are useful, building community demands ongoing attention and practice. Community is typically thought of as a noun -- as a place, as a destination. The community which I believe is most needed in today’s organizations is a verb. It is a way of being together rather than a place to be. It adapts and assimilates even as the boundaries and membership of the organization changes. It is an ongoing process and demands continual opportunity for practice.

As community is practiced, and as trust builds and relationships deepen, organizations are then able to practice and develop generative leadership in highly immersive, emergent learning laboratories. This is the developmental point which I alluded to earlier -- where teams go beyond the measurable skills and knowledge which they share and move into a deeper, tacit level of connectedness and alignment. When athletic teams reach this state, it is often referred to as the “zone.” In organizations, I refer to these periods of finely-tuned alignment as being in the “flow.” As I indicated in chapter three, I believe that these flow states can be intentionally developed -- that they are not simply a reflection of chance and circumstance.

As a culture, we predominantly have three mental models for leadership: strong, unwavering, individual leadership or democracy by vote or anarchy. Generative leadership, as I have reiterated throughout this thesis, is a model of shared, emergent, fluid
leadership. As a culture, we have very little experience with this model. This is why I believe it is essential that we spend considerable time building this capacity.

I don’t believe we can reasonably expect any organization to easily or quickly build the capacity for generative leadership. Before teams can effectively enter into the “flow” of generative leadership, I believe it is necessary, as I have articulated in this chapter, to first develop effective “process” skills and then to practice these skills in the process of building relationships for shared understanding (building community). It is only when individuals are equipped with certain foundational, “relational” skills and only after teams/organizations have developed a relative degree of trust, safety and shared understanding that the capacity for generative leadership can truly be engendered.

The generative leadership learning laboratories where advanced group sensitivities are developed and practiced are highly emergent. As I have stressed before, I believe that these skills and sensitivities are continually practiced while addressing business “tasks.” How does this happen?

Initially, it is important that the consultant/facilitator not be physically present during these sessions. If, in fact, the collective is to develop its own capacity for shared facilitation and generative leadership, then the group must avoid the temptation to defer to outside leadership.

Videotaping these sessions is one effective way for the consultant to observe the process while not interfering or unduly perturbing the system. Clearly, the presence of a video camera still represents an intervention. Nonetheless, this offers the consultant an opportunity to provide useful feedback and coaching in a relatively non-invasive manner.

In essence, the generative leadership learning laboratory is an opportunity for teams to work on tasks of their choosing (usually in the form of relevant business projects) while being explicitly mindful of practicing shared, emergent forms of leadership. The teams are self-selecting and self-organizing, usually around specific work projects. The teams practice forming and reforming relative to emergent needs. In fact, much of the learning surrounds this fluid dance of:

- team formation
- emergent leadership
Building the capacity for generative leadership includes an increased sense of how to initially create work teams (based on needed talents and skills), how to fluidly share leadership, how to dissolve once the task has been completed and then how to self-organize and re-form as new needs emerge. (Coaching from the consultant usually involves feedback around this process.)

As time and resources grow increasingly scarce, an organization's competitive edge is often dependent on its ability to manage time and utilize its human resources to their full capacity. This includes, for example, mitigating unnecessary meetings as well as not wasting unnecessary skills and time on projects that could easily be engineered and led by others. It is critical to emphasize, however, that this understanding and implementation must emerge out of the collective. In other words, it is no longer viable for the understanding of how to “engineer” and how to “lead” the system to rest in the hands of a few. The leading edge for today’s learning organizations is the ability to continually re-engineer and self-organize itself depending on emergent needs. This kind of sensing, this deeper level of intuiting and understanding must “emerge” out of collective, generative leadership if, in fact, the organization is serious about sustainable, transformational change.

Generative leadership learning laboratories can last anywhere from a day to a month (or longer) depending on the capacity and needs of the team(s). (The ideal, of course, is that the organization comes to see itself, in essence, as one ongoing generative leadership laboratory). Again, I stress the need for practice and reinforcement. Sharing leadership in highly functional, fluid ways is a deft art. Learning how to listen for emergence, learning how to listen to what is most needed and then take action in a seamless manner is largely uncharted terrain in most organizations. We understand high control systems where one person or a small group of managers maintain authority. We understand representative forms of democracy. But the territory of shared, generative leadership -- where each person is invited to become a participant in helping to lead and serve the organization -- this is unfamiliar terrain indeed.
Again, I return to the question of how to measure the capacity for generative leadership. How do we measure an organization’s transformation? As consultants, how do we know if our intervention has been successful?

As I have repeatedly offered, I see the development of these capacities and sensitivities as an ongoing practice. It is difficult, if not impossible, to every truly ascertain when we are, in fact, “developed.” We are always learning, also improving our ability to deeply listen to what is wanting to emerge (in both our own lives and within the organizations we serve) and then having the courage to act on this.

One standard of success which I might offer is the general, systemic “health” and overall function of the organization:

* Has the work of individuals within the system become more reflective of their unique gifts and passions?
* Is the organization able to respond and adapt more quickly to both internal and external events?
* Is there a palpable sense of possibility and regeneration where before there was anxiety and frustration?

As organizations learn to trust generative leadership and allow for the self-organizing emergence of the natural talents and creativity of its people, these organizations will inevitably be more sustainable and profitable.

Admittedly, this remains somewhat murky terrain. When we practice generative forms of leadership we are continually inquiring into what is needed, continually seeking to be in service to what is most wanting to happen. It is at this point that language often fails us. We have few words to describe the kind of deeper listening and deeper inquiry that is needed for this work. We have few words to describe the middle ground between control and anarchy -- few words to describe the continually emerging dance of stepping forward (to lead) and then stepping back (to serve).

This quality of leadership and relationship is indeed very difficult to describe even when experienced. And yet, as I have said throughout this thesis, the shifting, unfolding complexity of our global village demands that we discover more effective means by which
to lead and serve. Somehow, we need to keep practicing the dance, regardless of how nebulous and enigmatic it often feels.
CHAPTER SIX
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This thesis is the current synthesis of a personal learning journey I have taken over the last several years -- a journey into the foundations of transformational learning within organizations. My ideas and queries are reflective of an abiding, relentless passion for a particular quality of collaborative, systemic learning which I refer to as “emergent” learning.

I begin with a basic assumption which informs all the thinking that unfolds throughout this thesis: the sustainability of our organizations, and quite possibly the survival of our species, is dependent not on the leadership and the development of a chosen few, but on our collective ability to deeply listen for and sense what most needs to happen within a given group of people and then to have the courage to act on this.

As a culture, I believe we have very little experience with collective, shared forms of leadership. Although we live in a democracy, most of us live under the constant veil of authority and control. We are most familiar with high control, high structure systems. It is the way we have typically learned within our schools. It is the way we have traditionally set up our organizations.

We have lived our lives with deeply entrenched, mostly tacit beliefs about deferring to “experts” and the need for strong, charismatic leaders. These tacit beliefs have largely disempowered and disconnected us from accessing our most fully creative, generative selves.

It is my belief that the deepest reservoirs of learning are found in collaborative, “emergent” learning experiences. In essence, the question becomes: what can happen when groups of people gather as teachers and learners together to share their thinking, their imaginings, their hopes and fears? What new thinking can be born? And how might this impact our sense of leadership and collective action?
It remains essential, though, to view “emergent” learning experiences within the context of what I call the “cycle of progressive learning.” The cycle includes “structured” learning (didactic teaching), “facilitated” learning (guided, interactive learning), and “emergent” learning (collaborative learning where task and process is co-created and facilitation shared). The entire cycle is important for the learning process and yet I am most interested in the “emergent” elements of the cycle. This, I believe, is the new frontier for organizational development and transformation.

There are many forms which emergent learning can take. Contemporary structures for emergent learning have many of their roots in the group sensitivity training movement of the 1960s and ’70s. Present structures for emergent learning include: the dialogue process, Community Building, Open Space Technology and various hybrid forms of both verbal and non-verbal collaborative, co-creative processes. The work, however, must continually attempt to transcend the forms. While distinctions are useful, too much delineation and fragmentation runs the risk is creating the very structures of thinking which “emergent” learning seeks to dissipate. The essence of “emergent” learning is an experiential immersion in many of the foundational skills of critical and creative thinking: systems thinking, metacognition, inquiry, empathic and reflective listening, and seeing from multiple perspectives.

While emergent learning structures can have many purposes, I believe the greatest value of these learning experiences is developing the capacity for what I refer to as “generative” leadership. Generative forms of leadership are more reflective of who the leader is rather than what he or she does. Generative leadership is about developing what I call advanced group sensitivities -- listening for what is wanting and needing to happen within the collective and then having the courage to act on this. It is about engendering a new quality of leadership within organizations -- unfolding, shared leadership as an alternative to traditional, hierarchical control and authority.

It is important to continually view emergent learning experiences within the context of both individual and organizational readiness. To not acknowledge developmental capacity and receptivity is to run the risk of introducing inappropriate and ineffective learning structures. Although emergent learning experiences are intended to meet the deepest needs
of the participants, they are often unsettling and uncomfortable for those who have not developed some of the foundational “relational” skills necessary to thrive in this kind of learning environment.

It is, however, challenging and often diminishing to attempt to effectively assess or measure individual readiness or the capacity for generative leadership. As consultants and other change agents seek to transform organizations and build the capacity for generative forms of leadership, I believe they are well-served to undertake a development process that uses the cycle of progressive learning as its foundational model.

This developmental process begins with the consultant conducting one-on-one interviews with high potential leaders within the organization. These dialogical interviews build relationship, ascertain process skill level and also begin to model more effective communication skills. Building these relationships helps surface core skills that will lay the foundation for team building and community building throughout the organization. The consultant partners with the organization to identify the core skills and then creates learning environments within the organization in which these skills are taught. After the skills have been introduced, participating members of the organization then practice the skills in collaborative learning laboratories where authentic communication and relational skill building is practiced against the backdrop of exploring and pursuing relevant business tasks. As trust builds and relationships deepen, groups then enter into emergent learning laboratories where generative leadership is developed amongst ongoing work groups that practice unfolding, shared leadership while continually self-organizing and reforming around essential business tasks.

Developing generative leadership demands ongoing practice and development. It is a deft art rather than a precise science. Over time and with continual attention, new possibilities for increased adaptability, creativity and collaboration can intentionally be developed within the learning organizations of tomorrow.

As I indicated at the outset, I believe that this thesis constitutes a synthesis of what I know at this time. It is only a beginning -- an initial blueprint which will guide my next steps into helping organizations grow and transform.
I believe that what I know now will probably seem outdated in just a few short years. I believe we are at a major cusp point in our understanding of how to create more collaborative, more systemic, more functional organizational structures. The future is exciting and also very uncertain.

I believe there are several possible future scenarios for our organizations -- several threads of possibility that are moving simultaneously and paradoxically. One can, for instance, see much evidence for the further degradation and disempowerment of those who work in organizations, particularly large corporations. As downsizing, re-organization and an ongoing sense of economic uncertainty continue to impact most industries, insecurity and instability will pervade organizations. This lack of emotional safety and security within the workplace will manifest as the increased longing for control and authority with little regard for values and ethics. As global competition increases, and as goods and resources grow scarce, fear and instability exacerbate and organizations become increasingly profit-focused, hierarchical and dismissive of collaborative structures for learning.

This is one future scenario. There is certainly evidence for this possible future -- a future which I believe will probably lead to the destruction of our economy and quite possibly our species.

I also believe, however, that there is equal evidence for another future scenario within organizational life. In this scenario, both small and large companies begin drawing upon natural, living systems as functional metaphors and models for organization. Broad-ranging industries begin to understand the social and economic windfall of more collaborative, systemic structures for learning. Organizations come to view their functioning in more holistic, interconnected ways and see the weaknesses in many of the mechanistic, Newtonian models of the past.

These organizations commit time and resources to developing the full capacity of their workforce, continually create space for authentic, reflective interaction, are continually in service to the deepest needs of both customers and employees, and in doing so, begin to access a much deeper and more effective capacity to accomplish complex tasks. Employees feel empowered and invested in the well-being of the organization. Initiative and creativity
flourish. Leadership naturally unfolds and emerges as it is needed to serve the collective good.

Organizations which evolve in this way become models of emotional health, sustainability and profitability. People work harder, are more creative, and feel a deeper connection to their organization which is reflected in long-term commitment. These “leaderful” organizations keep costs low and profits high by greatly reducing turnover, mitigating excessive management and supervisory overhead, and continually accessing the fullest capacity of a highly collaborative, streamlined workforce.

It is my deep belief that the success of these leading-edge organizations will become a kind of “infection” that quickly spreads. Paradigms will shift exponentially rather than incrementally. Success will model success.

And so, which future will it be? And what will determine that future?

These are the questions and considerations which compel me. There is an increasing abundance of talented, passionate individuals, many of whom have been referenced in these pages, who are committing their lives to bringing new forms of learning and functioning to organizations in an effort to help those institutions heal and become more whole.

It is, at times, tireless, frustrating work. As we seek to plant new seeds of understanding, we can sometimes feel like we’re plowing the ocean.

For those of us committed to enabling organizational regeneration and transformation, we are well-served to heed our own advice about the importance of commitment and ongoing practice. In his book, Creating an Imaginative Life, Michael Jones relays a poignant story as told by author Mary Catherine Bateson surrounding Japanese culture. A young woman was asked about Japanese respect for the father. “Oh, no,” said the young woman, “in Japan we do not respect the father. You see,” she said with the most delicate emphasis, “we practice respect for the father in case we someday find someone who deserves that respect” (1995, pg. 45). As Jones goes on to say, “practice prepares me, it deepens my capacity so that when the moment does come, I am ready” (pg. 45).

In the end, we don’t know how our work will ultimately impact the people whom we seek to serve. As consultants, as educators, I think we are well-served not to see our role-
as seeking to “change” organizations, but rather to continually practice more functional ways of learning and being together within organizations in the hope that from time to time we will find an organization willing to enter the dance with us.

At the core of the work I have been describing throughout this thesis is “choice.” In his novel, Ishmael, Daniel Quinn talks about the “stories” that our culture has continually reinforced over the course of lives (1992). These cultural “stories” become deeply entrenched beliefs and mental models about the way things are. We often feel that we have no choice but the to follow the script that has already been written for us.

For decades, our organizations have been enacting one set of stories. These scripts probably once served us well. They are now no longer sustainable or functional.

Each one of us can either choose to begin authoring new organizational stories or we can choose to remain mired in the old scripts. We have the capacity to create both futures and yet I would be remiss not to acknowledge the awesome challenges that await the brave men and women who are seeking to create new organizational paradigms.

As I have said, I believe we are at a cusp point. The tide could flow in many ways. I will close by echoing the following words from Margaret Wheatley:

I too can feel the ground shaking.
I hear its deep rumblings.
At any moment now,
the earth will crack open
and I will stare into its dark center.
Into that smoking caldera,
I will throw most of what is treasured,
most of the techniques and tools
that have made me feel competent.

I cannot do that yet;
I cannot just heave everything I know
into the abyss.

But I know it is coming.

And when it comes,
when I have made my sacrificial offerings
to the gods of understanding,
then the ruptures will cease.

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Healing waters will cover the land,
giving birth to new life,
burying forever the ancient, rusting machines
of our past understandings.

And on these waters I will set sail
to places I only now imagine.

There I will be blessed with new visions
and new magic.

I will feel once again like a creative contributor
to this mysterious world.

But for now, I wait.

An act of faith.

Land ho.

(1992)


McMaster, Michael. “Learning-Org, an ongoing discussion of Organizational Learning on the internet, hosted by Richard Karash.” For information, email Rick Karash at rkarash@karash.com


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