Discovering Learning Organizations As Communities
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I am a founding member of the Society for Organizational Learning. I was originally a member of the M.I.T. Organizational Learning Center (OLC) starting in 1994 as a Researcher, where I was given latitude and encouragement to research and explore the emerging concept of learning communities. At the time, Peter Senge and others were discovering that when a learning organization functioned effectively, they actually behaved more like communities than organizations. I was living in Menlo Park, California at the time, where I was working on my Ph.D. in transpersonal psychology, and commuting to Boston for my internship at the OLC. Before I say more, I think it would be useful to describe some practice assumptions.

I prefer applied research. I have spent a good deal of time refining the theory, but I come from the pragmatist tradition, I like to apply theory, test it in real world situations, and validate truth claims through direct experience. I tend to take a constructivist view where I think the community around me participates in shaping what I believe and what I take as true. I was trained as a practitioner to be anti-skeptical. I don't think it serves me or my clients to go around doubting everything I think is true or real, because the truth I see is communally constructed and partial. Rather it is best to proceed with some degree of confidence with what I know and shift my thinking as I discover where I am wrong or the truth I am acting on is partial. I came to the OLC with the perspective that community building can be a personal developmental practice, a psychological and spiritual discipline that continually challenges and affirms my development. My practice is as developmental for me as it is for my clients.

It's a shame the term "transpersonal psychology" was chosen to describe a field of study dedicated to the study of highly evolved or enlightened people. Carl Jung is guilty for creating the term. The founders of the field felt it was important to emphasize that they included aspects of development that were "beyond basic ego development" and in some cases psychological phenomena like synchronicity – a psychological event involving more than a person's individual psychology. This field specialized in studying both highly enlightened people, and circumstances where human development could not be explained by the current theories of the day, that a person's psychological experience ended at the boundary of their physical body. In summary, transpersonal psychology is the formal study of highly developed people, communities, and organizations. There are thousands of methods and tools for cultivating advanced human development.

I reached out to Peter Senge to assist me with my research because I thought his view of learning organizations could be adapted to accommodate the type of high functioning and highly developed people I was encountering when building learning communities using M. Scott Peck's approach to community building.

Before arriving at the OLC, I had spent nearly a decade practicing with Peck and other trained by him to lead individuals, groups and organizations through a set of community building practices, that facilitated the group to function at a higher developmental level integration than was their cultural norm. For example, my colleague Sandi McCall and I facilitated a multi-year community building process with Island County health and human service providers, in Seattle, Washington. On a regular basis we met with various providers from across the county to coordinate action and align initiatives to prevent alcohol and drug abuse. Groups of 100 or more we would be comprised of judges, first responders, mental health workers, addiction specialists, police officers, and those responsible for prisons. Through a 3-day intensive learning process the community would first work on its own maturity as a community

and having learned to communicate more authentically, experience themselves with identities beyond their normative social roles, and given a structure for collaboration they would then collaborate on projects related to the root cause of substance abuse in their county.

Peck's method was routinely effective in leading a group through a process to enable higher order functioning. These groups were comprise of groups from the same organization, groups from multiple organizations that needed to collaborate, or groups of strangers who participate in public workshops.

What my fellow community building leaders and I routinely experienced was how quickly and consistently communities could temporarily outgrow their developmental enculturation. Authentic communities are remarkably effective decision making and problem solving units. This high functioning capability found in authentic communities has a resounding familiarity. Groups facing emergencies or crisis routinely experience themselves as high functioning authentic communities – until the crisis passes. They then return to their normal state of functioning. While developmental capacity is elastic in these situations, groups are unable to sustain a higher developmental functioning on a sustainable basis. Further, authentic communities formed while working on projects or as sub-groups were routinely disrupted when they began to interact with the larger organization.

My understanding progressed further when, in the early through late 1990's I was fortunate to work with Professor Michael Ray, who was at the time Professor of Creativity and Innovation and Marketing at Stanford's Graduate School of Business. I worked with him as a collaborator in designing and teaching his "New Paradigm in Business" class. Professor Ray was a member of the World Business Academy and was a good friend of Willis Harman[1], who was then the President of the Institute of Noetic Sciences.

In The *New Paradigm in Business*, Ray[2] defines a paradigm:

> Look in any dictionary and you'll find a definition such as "a pattern, example, or model." But with the publication of Thomas Kuhn's book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the word paradigm came to mean the fundamental assumptions about the nature of the world, particularly in the sciences. In fact, Kuhn said that a field wasn't a science unless it had a paradigm. Furthermore, a scientific revolution occurs when there is a paradigm shift – when the old set of assumptions no longer holds true, and a small band of scientists develops a new paradigm that everyone recognizes and applies, until yet change seems necessary again. (p. 1.)

Both Harman and Ray were concerned that fundamental shifts in foundational assumptions of business were needed to meet the needs of a more conscious society, with dwindling resources. They sought to raise consciousness in society that business needed to embrace the transpersonal and begin to incorporate a more mature set of metaphysical assumptions – to develop a worldview where people could access the source of their authentic self, and their higher creativity at work. They were convinced that learning communities could serve as a new paradigm form of business because they cultivated the learning and development environment necessary for people to gain access to their own and the collective creativity necessary to create a new paradigm. According to Ray[3]:

> This vision of creativity is far wider and deeper than mastery of problem solving techniques. It is also far more personal, but at the same time impersonal. We look within to find our own individual and universal source. That source has been called the inner self, the Self, the hidden mind, the divine spark, the Divine Ego, the Great I Am, God, and Essence. Some say that the very purpose of human existence is to get acquainted with your own essential qualities and express them in your daily activities. Whether it is the purpose of life or not, it is a fine definition of personal creativity: living every moment from your Essence. (p. 9)

Ray went on to say that access to this Essence and creativity was blocked by fear, negative personal judgment, the false personality, the ego or the external self. In his Personal Creativity in Business class, (which was the basis for the book by the same title, written with Rochelle Myers)[3] Ray taught that creativity in the workplace was a way of life, rather than a set of skills and techniques alone. For Ray, the essence of living creatively is catalyzed by answering two questions: "Who is my Self?" and "What is my Work?"

Professor Ray and I worked with Peck, Harman, and others to build a collective pedagogy that could help catalyze a shift in the business paradigm. We were searching for a new form of business organization one that could help shift the fundamental beliefs and worldview of its employees as it conducted business. The object would be to release the full natural creativity of every employee community member, and support them in developing a fuller and more accurate view of themselves and the world around them. Creating a new paradigm in business entailed teaching business leaders to cultivate communities that discovered their Essence, their connection with Source, their Self and their Work.

As part of the New Paradigm in Business class we sought exemplars of leaders enabling a paradigm shift, which led us to a poignant self report by the then CEO of Kao, the Japanese soap and cosmetic company. Yoshio Maruta struggled to shift his own and his company's corporate paradigm to include the fundamental belief that human beings are created unconditionally equally. His story represents the power and effectiveness of a corporate leader who describes his struggle to clarify his Self and his Work:

> Tormented by doubt and uncertainty, I needed guidance. After the unexpected death of my predecessor, I found myself appointed as the new president of the Kao Corporation. The suddenness of events left me unprepared to manage a corporation of this size.

> For guidance I searched through books of philosophy and practiced Zen meditation…. Prince Sotoku, who introduced Buddhism to Japan had a simplistic view of mankind that I found refreshing and similar to my personal feelings. The fundamental precept of his teaching s expound that all human beings are created unconditionally equal. He believed that there was one and one, universal truth to which life in all of its forms must submit.

> The prince, in short, had an absolutely egalitarian view of mankind. Basing my corporate management style on this truth, I have resisted the temptation to follow established business practices. (p.70)

Through these experiences I became convinced that if a new paradigm approach to business was to be founded on community building principles, a pluralistic and comprehensive approach to community would be needed. To further clarify and comprehend this idea I spent several years interviewing and studying with various community-building practitioners in order to gain their perspective on how to build community in organizations. This led to an anthology *Community Building: Renewing Spirit and Learning in Business,*[4] as a way to share with others what I was learning about community in business. I managed to express the core ideas in the vision statement for the anthology, which reads:

> To build a sense of authentic community within organizations that is both sustainable and imbued with spirit, we need to articulate a whole systems understanding. We also need a comprehensive technology of community making composed of skills, methodologies, practices and theory that will inform and guide an organization toward long term success. The authors of this anthology will create a compelling vision for what successful community can be, informing

the world as to its benefits, potential complexities, and pitfalls within organizational settings. (pp. 416-7)

In the Introduction to the book Peck wrote about what he called the "frontier of group space," a journey of individual and collective self discovery.

The anthology pointed out the underlying complexity that needed to be mastered to renew business communities. Putting it together, I learned from various colleagues to attend to organizational design, structure, governance, and the virtual community. It also became clear that tools, methods and practices for cultivating and sustaining community needed to be deployed according to a group's culture and current learning needs.

The anthology also makes it clear that organizations could build a core competence in community by cultivating three aspects of community:

1. cultivating experiences of interconnectedness;
2. learning the discipline of sustainable collective intelligence; and
3. building learning architecture.

I also began to note that there were three developmental challenges to sustaining community:

a.) a paradigm shift toward embracing wholeness;
b.) acquiring the discipline and mastery of developmental growth; and
c.) embracing social responsibility.

I came to believe that Senge was using the practice of building learning organizations to support a paradigm shift in business and in society. My reading of *The Fifth Discipline* was that the five disciplines were practice methodologies that would lead individuals and organizations through a systematic re-examination of the existing paradigm. I feel that one of the great strengths of Senge's approach to learning organizations is that it appealed to business people in the existing paradigm as well as those discovering an alternative paradigm. Similarly, each discipline could be interpreted from multiple levels of development, ranging from a more transpersonal and spiritual worldview to a childhood or early adult rule bound worldview.

I thus arrived at the OLC with an interest to create a subtype of a learning organization that could be used to transform and renew traditional business organizations into learning communities that flourished at the individual, as well as the organizational, level.

Endnotes:

1 Harman, Willis (1988) Global Mind Change; Warner Books; New York, NY

2 Ray, M. & Rinzler, A. (1993) The New Paradigm in Business; Putnam; New York, NY

3 Ray, Michael & Myers, Rochelle (1980) Creativity in Business; Doubleday, NewYork, NY

4 Gozdz, K., ed (1995) Community Building: Renewing Spirit and Learning in Business; New Leaders Press, San Francisco., CA