Goodbye, Command and Control
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Old ways die hard. Amid all the evidence that our world is radically changing, we cling to what has worked in the past. We still think of organizations in mechanistic terms, as collections of replaceable parts capable of being reengineered. We act as if even people were machines, redesigning their jobs as we would prepare an engineering diagram, expecting them to perform to specifications with machine-like obedience. Over the years, our ideas of leadership have supported this metaphoric myth. We sought prediction and control, and also charged leaders with providing everything that was absent from the machine: vision, inspiration, intelligence, and courage. They alone had to provide the energy and direction to move their rusting vehicles of organization into the future.

But we are surrounded by too many organizational failures to stay with this thinking. We know, for example, that in many surveys senior leaders report that the majority of their organizational change efforts or mergers fail. They and their employees report deep cynicism at the endless programs and fads; nearly everyone suffers from increased stress at the organizational lives we have created together. Survey after survey registers our loss of hope and increased uncertainty for every major institutional form in our society. Do we know how to organize anything anymore so that people want to engage in productive and contributing work?

But there is good news also. We have known for more than half a century that self-managed teams are far more productive than any other form of organizing. There is a clear correlation between participation and productivity; in fact, *productivity gains in truly self-managed work environments are at minimum thirty-five percent higher than in traditionally managed organizations*. And for years, Americans in all forms of institutions have asked for more local autonomy, insisting that they, at their own level, can do it better than the huge structures of organization now in place. There is both a need to have more autonomy in one's work, and strong evidence that such participation leads to the effectiveness and productivity we crave.

With so much evidence supporting participation, why isn't everyone working in a self-managed environment right now? This is a very bothersome question because it points to the fact that over the years, leaders consistently have chosen control rather than productivity. Rather than rethinking our fundamental assumptions about organizational effectiveness, we have stayed preoccupied with charts and plans and designs. We have hoped they would yield the results we needed but when they have failed consistently, we still haven't stopped to question whether such charts and plans are the real mute to productive work. We just continue to adjust and

tweak the various control measures, still hoping to find the one plan or design that will give us what we need.

Organizations of all kinds are cluttered with control mechanisms that paralyze employees and leaders alike. Where have all these policies, procedures, protocols, laws, and regulations come from? And why is it so difficult to avoid creating more, even as we suffer from the terrible confines of over-control? These mechanisms seem to derive from our fear, our fear of one another, of a harsh, competitive world, and of the natural processes of growth and change that confront us daily. Years of such fear have resulted in these Byzantine systems. We never effectively control people with these systems, but we certainly stop a lot of good work from getting done.

In the midst of so much fear, it's important to remember something we all know: People organize together to accomplish more, not less. Behind every organizing impulse is a realization that by joining with others we can accomplish something important that we could not accomplish alone. And this impulse to organize so as to accomplish more is not only true of humans, but is found in all living systems. Every living thing seeks to create a world in which it can thrive. It does this by creating systems of relationships where all members of the system benefit from their connections. This movement toward organization, called self--organization in the sciences, is everywhere, from microbes to galaxies. Patterns of relationships form into effective systems of organization. Organization is a naturally occurring phenomenon. The world seeks organization, seeks its own effectiveness. And so do the people in our organizations.

As a living system self-organizes, it develops shared understanding of what's important, what's acceptable behavior, what actions are required, and how these actions will get done. It develops channels of communication, networks of workers, and complex physical structures. And as the system develops, new capacities emerge from living and working together. Looking at this list of what a self-organizing system creates leads to the realization that the system can do for itself most of what leaders have felt was necessary to do to the systems they control.

Whenever we look at organizations as machines and deny the great self-organizing capacity in our midst, we, as leaders, attempt to change these systems from the outside in. We hope to change our organization by tinkering with the incentives, reshuffling the pieces, changing a part, or retraining a colleague or group. But these efforts are doomed to fail, and nothing will make them work. What is required is a shift in how we think about organizing. Where does organization come from? Organization occurs from the inside out, as people see what needs to happen, apply their experience and perceptions to the issue, find those who can help them, and use their own creativity to invent solutions. This process is going on right now, all over our organizations, in spite of our efforts at control. People are exercising initiative from a deeper desire to contribute, displaying the creativity that is common to all living things. Can we recognize the self-organizing behaviors of those in our organizations? Can we learn to support them and forgo our fear-based approaches to leadership?

Belief in the System

To lead in a self-organizing system, we have to ask ourselves, "How much trust do I have in the people who work here? Have they demonstrated any of these self-organizing behaviors

already?" This question of trust leads to a moment of deep reflection for any leader. Those leaders who have embraced a more participative, self-organizing approach tell of their astonishment. They are overwhelmed by the capacity, energy, creativity, commitment, and even love that they receive from the people in their organization. In the past they had simply assumed that most people were there for the money, that they didn't care about the welfare of the whole enterprise, that they were self-serving and narrowly focused.

No leader would voice these assumptions, but most leader behaviors reveal these beliefs. Does the leader believe that his or her vision is required to energize the whole company? Does the leadership team keep searching for new incentives to motivate employees as if they have no intrinsic motivation? Does the organization keep imposing new designs and plans on people and avoid real participation like the plague?

Every so often, we open ourselves to a moment of truth and realize the conflict between our behaviors and our deeper knowledge. As one manager of a Fortune 100 company said to me: "I know in my heart that when people are driving in to work that they're not thinking, 'How can I mess things up today? How can I give my boss a hard time?' No one is driving here with that intent, but we then act as if we believed that. We're afraid to give them any slack."

Most of us know that as people drive to work they're wondering how they can get something done for the organization *despite the organization*--despite the political craziness, the bureaucratic nightmares, the mindless procedures blocking their way. Those leaders who have used participation and self-organization have witnessed the inherent desire that most people have to contribute to their organizations. The commitment and energy resident in their organizations takes leaders by surprise. But in honoring and trusting the people who work with them, they have unleashed startlingly high levels of productivity and creativity.

Strategies for Change: Coherence not Control

If we think of organizations as living systems capable of self-organizing, then how do we think about change in these systems? The strategy for change becomes simpler and more localized. We need to encourage the creativity that lives throughout the organization, but keep local solutions localized. Too many change efforts fail when an innovation that has worked well in one area of the organization is rolled out through the entire organization. *This attempt to replicate success actually destroys local initiative.* It denies the creativity of everyone except a small group. All living systems change all the time, in new and surprising ways, discovering greater effectiveness, better solutions. They are not acting from some master plan. They are tinkering in their local environments, based on their intimate experience with conditions there and their tinkering shows up as effective innovation. But only for them. Information about what has worked elsewhere can be very helpful. However, these solutions cannot be imposed; they have to remain local.

This highly localized change activity does not mean that the organization spins off wildly in all directions. If people are clear about the purpose and true values of their organization, their individual tinkering will result in system wide coherence. In organizations that know who they are and mean what they announce, people are free to create and contribute. A plurality of

effective solutions emerges, each expressing a deeper coherence, an understanding of what this organization is trying to become.

Mort Meyerson, former chairman of Perot Systems, said that the primary task of being a leader is to make sure that the organization knows itself. That is, we must realize that the leader's task is to call people together often, so that everyone gains clarity about what we're doing, who we've become and how we've changed as we do our work, who we still want to be. This includes information available from our customers, our markets, our history, our mistakes. If the organization can stay in a continuous conversation about who it is and who it is becoming, then leaders don't have to undertake the impossible task of trying to hold it all together.

Organizations that are clear at their core hold themselves together because of their deep congruence. People are free to explore new avenues of activity, new ventures and customers in ways that make sense for the organization. It is a strange and promising paradox of living systems: Clarity about who we are as a group creates freedom for individual contributions. People exercise that freedom in the service of the organization, and their capacity to respond and change becomes a capability of the whole organization.

If leaders can ensure that the organization knows itself, that it's clear at its core, they must also tolerate unprecedented levels of "messiness" at the edges. This constant tinkering, this localized hunt for solutions never looks neat. Freedom and creativity always create diverse responses. If conformity is the goal, it will kill local initiative. Leaders have to be prepared to support such diversity, to welcome the surprises people will invent, and to stop wasting time trying to impose solutions developed elsewhere.

People always want to talk about what they do, what they see, how they can improve things, what they know about their customers. Supporting these conversations is an essential task of leaders. It's not about "the leader" developing the mission statement or employing experts to do a detailed analysis of your market strategy. These exercises, because they exclude more people than they include, never work as planned. When everyone in the organization understands who they are, and has contributed (even in a small way) to this understanding, the result is very high levels of commitment and capacity. As a leader supports the processes that help the organization know itself, the organization flourishes.

It's also notable that when we engage in meaningful conversations as an organization, and when we engage our customers, suppliers, community, and regulators in these conversations, everything changes. People develop new levels of trust for one another that show up as more cooperation and more forgiveness. People stop being so arbitrarily demanding when they are part of the process, when they no longer are looking in from the outside trying to get someone's attention.

Taking Action
Leaders put a premium on action. Organizations that have learned how to think together and that know themselves are filled with action. People are constantly taking initiative and making changes, often without asking or telling. Their individual freedom and creativity becomes a critical resource to the organization. Their local responsiveness translates into a much faster and more adaptable organization overall.

Most of us were told that the way to manage for excellence was to tell people exactly what they had to do and then make sure they did it. We learned to play master designer, assuming we could engineer people into perfect performance. But you can't direct people into perfection; you can only engage them enough so that they want to do perfect work.

But leaders need to know how to support these self-organizing responses. People do not need the intricate directions, time lines, plans, and organization charts that are assumed to be necessary. These are not how people accomplish good work; they are what impede contributions. *But people need a great deal from their leaders. They need information, access to one another, resources, trust, and follow-through.* Leaders are necessary to foster experimentation, to help create connections across the organization, to feed the system with information from multiple sources--all while helping everyone stay clear on what we agreed we wanted to accomplish and who we wanted to be.

Most of us were raised in a culture that told us that the way to manage for excellence was to tell people exactly what they had to do and then make sure they did it. We learned to play master designer, assuming we could engineer people into perfect performance. But you can't direct people into perfection; you can only engage them enough so that they want to do perfect work. For example, in a few chemical plants that operate with near-perfect safety records for years at a time, they achieve these results because their workers are committed to safety. It becomes a personal mission. The regulations, the EPA, OSHA, are all necessary parts of their system, but they never can spell out the route to perfect safety. That comes from hundreds and thousands of workers who understand their role in safety, who understand the whys of safety, who understand that it's up to them.

For all the unscripted events an irate customer, a winter storm, a global crisis--we depend on individual initiative. Ultimately, we have to rely not on the procedure manuals, but on people's brains and their commitment to doing the right thing. If they are acting by rote or regimen, they have lost the capacity for excellence. Imposed control breeds passivity, resistance, resentment. But people do have to know what "right" means. They have to know what safety really means, what good customer service is. If they know what's right, then their intelligence and heart are engaged on behalf of the organization.

No More Quick Fixes
Self-organization is a long-term exploration requiring enormous self-awareness and support. This is true partially because it represents such a fundamentally different way of thinking about organization, and partially because all changes in organization take much longer than we want to acknowledge. If leaders could learn anything from the past twenty years, it's that there are no quick fixes. For most organizations, meaningful change is at least a three to five year process--although this seems impossibly long for many managers. Yet multiyear strategic change efforts are the hard reality we must face. These things take time. How long, for instance, has your organization been struggling with quality, excellence? How long has it been searching for the right organizational design? How many years have you been working to create effective teams? Jack Welch, for one, understood that it would take at least 10 years to develop the capacities of GE's people. In the late '80s, that was a radical insight and a shocking commitment.)

Most CEOs don't want to squeeze their organizations for short-term profitability or shortsighted outcomes that don't endure. Most leaders resent the focus on quarterly or monthly measures of success. Legacy is an important issue for many leaders. They talk about a deep desire for their work to mean something, to endure beyond their tenure. Leaders too have suffered from the terrible destruction visited on many organizations. A senior executive of a major industrial firm, speaking for many, said in a meeting: "I've just been told to destroy what I spent twenty years creating." Who among us wants to end a career with that realization?

But if we are to develop organizations of greater and enduring capacity, we have to turn to the people of our organization. We have to learn how to encourage the creativity and commitment that they wanted to express when they first joined the organization. We have to learn how to get past the distress and cynicism that's been created in the past several years, and use our best talents to figure out how to reengage people in the important work of organizing.

The Leader's Journey
Whenever humans need to change a deeply structured belief system, everything in life is called into question--- relationships with loved ones, children, colleagues, with authority and major institutions. A group of senior leaders, reflecting on the changes they had experienced, commented that the higher you are in the organization, the more change is required of you personally. Those who have led their organizations into new ways often say that the most important change was what occurred in themselves. Nothing would have changed in their organizations if they hadn't changed.

All this seems true to me, but I think the story is more complex. Leaders managing difficult personal transitions are also doing many other things to the organization. They are supporting team structures, more collaboration, using more participative processes, introducing new ways of thinking. They are setting a great many things in motion simultaneously within the organization. These move through the system; some work, some don't, but the climate for experimentation is evident. A change here elicits a response there, which calls for a new idea, which elicits yet another response. It's an intricate exchange and co-evolution, and it's nearly impossible to look back and name any single change as the cause of all the others. In this way, organizational change is a dance, not a forced march.

Leaders experience their own personal change most intensely, and so I think they report on this as the key process. But what I observe is far more interesting. In the end, we can't define a simple list of activities that were responsible for the organization shifting, and we certainly can't replicate anyone else's process for success. But we can encourage the experimentation and tinkering, the constant feedback and learning, and the wonderful sense of camaraderie that emerges as everyone gets engaged in making the organization work better than ever before, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Sustainability, Not Employability
I believe there is one principle that should be embraced by all organizations as they move into the future, and that is sustainability. How can we endure over time? What about us is worth sustaining long-term? This focus flies in the face of current fashion. Our infatuation with fleeting "virtual" organizations misses an important truth: We cannot create an organization that means something to its people if that organization has no life beyond the next project or contract. We cannot promise people, for instance, only a few months or years of employment

with vague assurances of their future "employability"-- and expect the kind of energy and commitment that I've described.

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Employability in lieu of mutual commitment is a cop-out. We focus on it as a response to the grave uncertainty we feel about the future. Since we can't predict markets, products, customers, governments, or anything, we decide not to promise anything to anyone. Too many leaders are saying, in effect, "We don't know what the future will be or how to manage this uncertainty, so let's think of our employees as negotiable commodities." What they've really said is "Let's buy flexibility by giving up loyalty."

Commitment and loyalty are essential in human relationships. So how can we pretend we don't need them at work? The real issue is that we don't know how to engage people's loyalty and yet maintain the flexibility we require. But leaders should be searching for creative answers to this dilemma, not ignoring it by settling on the non-solution of employability. Employability is a far more destructive practice than we have imagined. The organizations that people love to be in are ones that have a sense of history and identity and purpose. These are things that people want to work for. The belief that a company has stood for something in the past is a reason to want to move it into the future.

The Real Criteria for Measuring Change
You know when you walk in the door of an organization whether people want to be there. The sense of belonging (or not) is palpable. Yet few change efforts take that into account and far too many end up killing the organization's capacity for more change. To measure whether a change effort has been successful, we need to ask, "Are people in the organization more committed to being here now than at the beginning of this effort?" In terms of sustainability, we need to ask if, at the end of this change effort, people feel more prepared for the next wave of change. Did we develop capacity or just stage an event? Do people feel that their creativity and expertise contributed to the changes?

If we're focused on these questions as indicators, we can create organizations that know how to respond continuously to shifts in markets and environments, organizations that have learned how to access the intelligence that lives everywhere in the system. We will have supported people's innate capacity to deal with changing conditions because we will have learned how to engage them. We will have honored their innate capacity for self organization. And they will respond with the initiative and creativity that is found only in life, never in machines.

ABOUT MARGARET (MEG) WHEATLEY, Ed.D.

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