

Breathing Life Into Organizations



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any of us have begun to think about the world differently. In many fields of inquiry, people are discovering a new world view. We are rediscovering that the world is not a machine. We are rediscovering that we, as human beings, are not machines.

Without the mechanistic blinders of the past, we are encouraged to inquire about entirely different issues. We now can ask about work and meaning, work and wholeness, work and spirit. We are free to talk about love, compassion, meaning—the whole host of human emotions and experience.

In this emerging view, we are rediscovering that the world is supportive of who we are as human beings. We are free to rediscover what it means to be human and what it means to work together in organizations. We can develop new beliefs about work and organizations and human beings, who try to make life different by our labors. Such new beliefs make life in organizations much more interesting to think about.

The World of the Past Several Centuries Was Alien to Us as Humans

Since about three centuries ago, scientists and philosophers have stated that the world was a great machine. In one of the strangest twists of thinking in the history of ideas, this mechanistic image of the world was turned back on ourselves, and we came to believe that humans too were machines.

A New

World View

Based on

Chaos and

Complexity

**Margaret J.
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This is the world in which most of us in Western society grew up. From such mechanistic imagery, we developed our senses of self, of others, and of organizations. It was a strange world view. We shredded the world into pieces and then reconstructed it. Piece by piece, we built work tasks, departments, functions, and specializations. We focused on creating organizations as well-oiled machines designed by bright engineers. Organizational leaders, or teams, could figure it all out ahead of time. If they were smart, the machine worked well. If their design failed, they simply went looking for another solution to impose upon us.

Trying to engineer this world into existence, we became isolated, lonely individuals who couldn't talk with one another about what really mattered. Instead of exploring what it was to be human, we suppressed those questions. We could not acknowledge who we were. The rules of machine efficiency smothered the deeper realms of experience, the feelings and desires that make us human:

- We spent all our time constructing organizations according to machine logic.
- We focused exclusively on how best to analyze, assemble, and carefully control the world. Nothing else mattered.
- Our most important task was to engineer the world into existence.
- The world itself was dead, incapable of creating anything for itself.

This machine world ignored us as living systems. Machines have no innate desires, motivations, or intelligence. Everything must be built into them, imposed from the outside. In our organizations, questions about our effort, commitment, motivation, and quality were answered mechanistically. It was thought that the only way to motivate people was from the outside. Leaders were charged with making us work. They needed to find

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the right benefit or salary or threat. Without these external coercions, we wouldn't work. We, like the world, were assumed to be dead, incapable of creating anything from ourselves.

Machine thinking had an impact. As the machine image took over so much of our thinking, human nature receded from view. Human concerns evaporated in the wake of relentless mechanistic forces. In the workplace, we couldn't talk about our passions, our families, our spirits, or our true selves because these had nothing to do with the efficiency concerns of machines. Because we could not find ourselves in this world, the outlook became more and more fearsome.

We often seek to control what we fear. Having created an alien world, we could only hope to grow more skillful in dominating it. We sought to harness and control everything: nature, one another, the future. Command-and-control became our only hope to fend off this hostile world. Meanwhile, the machinery of organizations ground onward. Work became more deadly and more deadening, and our fear increased. The heart and spirit of being human disappeared from organizations. It is this deadening world view that is coming to an end.

We are rediscovering that the world is alive, that we are alive. This world welcomes back our most human qualities, our creativity and passion and spirit. As we leave behind the machine images, we recover a world that is supportive of us in the

full expression of our humanity. The world supports our efforts to organize, to accomplish, to find meaning, more than we could have hoped.

The Authors' Personal Exploration of Living Systems

For the past few years, we personally have been exploring the world through these new eyes of living systems. We have learned a great deal from the work of scientists who study complex systems, the cosmos, the origins of life. While many of these scientists' findings seem startlingly new, mostly their work echoes in a different voice what philosophers and spiritual leaders have been saying for many long centuries.

Our personal exploration has led us to a new set of beliefs about people and organizations. We share our new beliefs here as a "work in progress." Although some of these principles will undoubtedly change, the fundamental shift in perception that these beliefs represent has changed forever our view of work, organizations, and human endeavor. We personally have discovered a world that has respiration our own work and given us not only new understandings but new hope.

Living systems learn constantly. They change when necessary, but they adapt by *tinkering*. The world is not as harsh as it has been made out to be. Living systems tinker in their environments, exploring new possibili-

ties, new forms of creative self-expression. In tinkering, they make do with what is at hand: a solution doesn't have to be right, it just has to work. When it stops working, they tinker their way into another solution. Their ability to learn, adapt, and create is fed by information. They maintain an acute awareness of what is occurring around them. They are webbed with information from all directions. Such information and acuity allows them to be responsive and creative when the situation requires a change.

Living systems are self-organizing. They have the innate capacity to create structures and processes that respond to the needs of the moment. Their organizing tendency shows up as temporary patterns and structures that emerge without plans, supervision, or directive leadership. Every-

where in the universe, we observe this self-organizing capacity. The complex structures of life emerge from many local self-organizing efforts, not from a master plan or blueprint.

Life is systems-seeking. Life seeks to affiliate with other life. Such affiliation makes more life possible. Systems of relationships develop because systems make life more sustainable for their individual members. From these networks of support, a global system emerges that is more stable and less affected by changes. Such a stable system provides the conditions for greater diversity. More varieties of life can maintain themselves because they have aligned with differing partners.

Life is attracted to order, but it uses "messes" to get there. The processes of life have nothing to do with ma-

chine efficiencies. They are fuzzy, redundant, and messy. Many solutions are sought in parallel; many individuals are involved in experimentation over the same dilemma. There is neither a straight line of logic nor a process that leads to a perfect solution.

Instead, there is a great deal of tinkering till someone discovers something that works for now. But the messy processes and fuzzy logic lead to orderly solutions because it is in the nature of life to evolve toward more complex and effective systems.

Organizations are living systems. As living systems, organizations possess all of the creative, self-organizing capacities of other forms of life. The people within all organizations are capable of change, growth, and adaptation—they do not require outside engineering or detailed design. People

Expanded for 1996 ICMA Conference

TECHCITY

TechCity, the special technology "hands-on learning laboratory" that was popular at last year's conference in Denver, has been expanded in every way for 1996. TechCity '96 will feature 30 exhibits that showcase relevant local government applications and solutions in a fun and interactive setting.

ICMA has formed a partnership with Government Technologies (GT), Sacramento, California, to help coordinate TechCity. For the past 10 years, GT has run a conference that has attracted the top names among computer, software, accessory, and telecommunications companies. For ICMA's conference, GT also has enlisted companies that have dedicated government groups. These companies, as well as some representatives of their local

government partners, will be at TechCity to present the contributions that technology has made to their workplaces and what it can do for your government. A few of the firms scheduled to be at TechCity '96 are:

- CompUSA
- Dell Computer
- IBM
- Kronos
- NXi Communications
- Unysis

Stop at TechCity and see what the buzz is all about. It

will be located in the exhibit hall, just across from the ICMA Bookstore, and will be open Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday. Check your conference program or conference newspaper for the schedule.



are capable of creating structures and responses that work, then moving into new ones when required. We possess natural capacities to work with change in a creative and effective way.

Because we are living systems, most people are intelligent, creative, adaptive, and self-organizing. We want to organize, to learn, to do high-quality work, to contribute, to find meaning. We do not need to impose these attributes on one another. We merely need to learn how to evoke them.

Our Emerging Beliefs About Organizations

Our emerging beliefs create new questions and new ways of thinking about organizations. The authors' set of beliefs, which we like to think captures some elements of an emerging world view, influences every aspect of our

own thinking about organizations.

So many efforts in the past have been focused on how to create learning, motivation, or structures, i.e., how to get the machine to work. We are finding, as our own world view shifts, that we are asking a different set of questions. If organizations are living systems, then they have many innate capacities, perhaps even some that we never expected. In looking for these innate abilities, we have become curious enough to ask:

- Where does organization come from?
- Where does learning come from?
- Where does quality come from?

If organizations are living systems, then even these characteristics are innate. We do not have to impress or train or bribe people into organizing, learning, or doing top-quality

work. We do not even have to structure organizations into existence.

Creating supportive conditions for self-organization. Most people want to express their quality, their learning, their self-organization. They want to figure out the best response, the best structure for a given situation. The question becomes whether we can create the organizational conditions that allow people to express these innate desires and abilities.

The primary condition we need to create is expressed in this first principle:

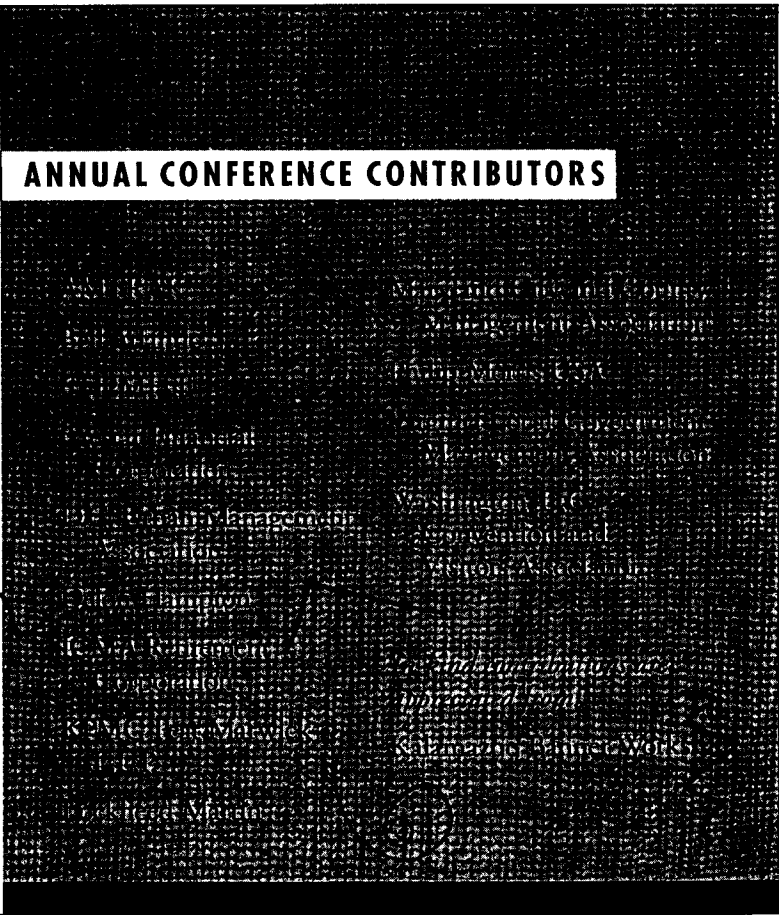
An organizational community that is clear about its intent knows what it wants to accomplish and knows what its purpose is.

If people have enough clarity about intent and direction, then they

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can effectively self-organize into temporary but appropriate structures for fulfilling that intent. They know the self that they need to organize around. Another condition also is essential to creating a purposeful organizational community. By definition,

Living systems are webbed with feedback, with information available from all directions.

This is true for organizations as well. Information is the nourishment of the organization; the system cannot adapt or change if it is starved to learn what is happening. It cannot be adaptive without access to information on its situation. The organization loses its adaptability whenever anyone goes hungry for information.

Living systems also are webbed with connections; individual members have access to the whole system.

In networks of living organizations, people need to know that they can reach any point in the system as a particular need or opportunity arises. They need to be able to seek out skills, experience, and information from anyone in the system in order to respond intelligently to a particular situation.

If we focus on creating these conditions, we find that most of what we have spent our time on—designing, structuring, planning, motivating—becomes unnecessary. These things will be done by the organization as it tinkers in its environment, as it seeks to find the best system or solution for the demands of the times.

What Would Be Different If We Supported Self-Organization?

Think about how quality efforts would differ in a living system. What would be different if all managers realized that most people deeply

Tinkering the World Into Existence

We do not have language to convey the processes that life uses to organize itself, and the words of machine efficiency do not apply. Yet any of the words that describe the emergent processes of life—tinkering, groping, experimenting—sound soft or irreverent.

Biologist Francisco Valera describes evolution in this way: "Many paths of change are possible . . . in a path of continuous tinkering." The tinkering concept appears in the work of other evolutionary biologists to describe the creative, evolving nature of life. Nothing is fixed, not even the rules of evolution. We are all making it up as we go along.

We need to become better tinkers, able to make quick assessments of which resources are available and what is possible right now. Strategic plans get replaced by organizations of distributed discovery and by workplaces filled with many tinkers.

desire to do high-quality work, want to make things work better, and want to develop sustaining relationships beyond narrow self-interests?


It seems to us that if managers genuinely believed in such innate capacities, we would not be investing nearly as much in training programs, motivational efforts, contests, and awards. We would spend much more time in thinking about how to engage people in figuring out how to resolve quality issues. We would focus on providing better resources to support these inquiries, rather than limiting them to particular metrics or measures imposed from outside.

We would support many more solution-seeking processes, many more sources of feedback. We would promote a whole conglomeration of quality efforts that would operate in

parallel, rather than hope to find the one perfect program or measure. We also would understand that meaningful relationships with customers are a natural desire of most humans. We would give up trying to implant customer service through trite slogans or campaigns, instead supporting our employees to seek out the relationships with customers that they discover they need. We could expect that they would create diverse but effective responses.

If organizations are living systems, then quality is not tools or diagnostics or particular process modifications. Quality, we believe, is a deeply ingrained desire to make our lives mean something, to contribute to others. We do this by weaving ourselves together into systems that can sustain us. We know that we cannot do it alone.

In the later years of his life, Dr. W. Edwards Deming urged us to look more deeply into quality, to understand what it was, truly. He stated simply that quality was about the human spirit. "Spirit" comes from the Latin word for breath—breath as a symbol of life.

As many of us inquire into respiration work, we literally are breathing life back into our organizations. As we understand more about the qualities and capacities of living beings, we naturally will create organizations that nourish and respect our extraordinary human spirits. 

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