OUR EXPANDING WORLDVIEW:
FINDING ORDER IN CHAOS
THROUGH DIALOGUE

"Think how many absolutely new scientific conceptions
have arisen in our own generation, how many new problems
have been formulated that were never thought of before, and then
cast an eye upon the brevity of science's career... Is it credible
that such a mushroom of knowledge, such a growth overnight as
this can represent more than the minutest glimpse of what the
universe will really prove to be when adequately understood?
No! Our science is a drop, our ignorance a sea."

William James

The ideas that underlie and frame the practice of dialogue are similar
to those growing out of an emerging worldview that comes from the
new sciences. You may have heard something about the revolutionary
nature of this emerging worldview, yet not be aware of how it impacts
the way we think about organizations and managing human systems.
Though the new sciences have been around for some time (i.e., quanti-
tum mechanics since the turn of the century and self-organizing sys-
tems from the last few decades), we are just now figuring out what it
all means to us in practical day-to-day ways.

Basically, the revolution from the new sciences as applied to work is
about moving beyond what we call The Machine Model of Organizations.
This model is based on the following assumptions:

- Organizations function as large machines with removable parts
  and in a hierarchic structure.
- Workers are mere cogs in a wheel, removable, replaceable and
  expendable.
- Leaders are captains at the helm of slow-moving ships.

Images from quantum mechanics and self-organizing systems theory
continue to add new dimensions. We emphasize the word add because
when we talk about these new images, we do not wish to imply that
the older images of organizations as machine are wrong or out-of-date.
From our expanded worldview, we might see them as limited or singu-
lar ways of perceiving more generalized and larger principles that we
now know to be true. They are useful for organizing ourselves within
specific ranges of experience, but limiting in larger contexts.

Quantum mechanics liken the organization to a hologram wherein
all parts contain the whole and the whole is made up of unique parts. If
we apply this holographic image to human systems, it becomes impor-
tant that each worker, no matter at what level in the organization, have
mental images of how the whole organization operates and knows what
is important to it on a timely basis. Information becomes vital, commu-
nication between and among all the parts essential. What one part
knows must be available to all so that the essential life of the organization
is maintained.

Self-organizing systems theory liken the organization to a self-
referencing system, which maintains itself around an evolving core
identity. Adaptation to changing conditions is the norm. If we apply this
image to organizations, we see that top/down direction needs to be sup-
plemented with information moving to all parts of the organization
through rapid networks of communication. Each part of the organiza-
tion needs to be able to reference what all other parts are doing. In this
way, the whole organization can adjust to changing internal and exter-
nal conditions fluidly.
If we combine these two new images from quantum mechanics and self-organizing systems theory we might redefine organizations as “self-organizing holograms.”

But how would such an image as “self-organizing holograms” help us in our day-to-day work? How would it combine with what we already do in organizations and piggyback onto the “machine model of organizations,” the existing image we all carry around with us? Finally, how can this funny-sounding image add to rather than detract from successes we have had with existing organizational practices? And, what role can dialogue play?

We are all learning how to operate and dance outside our comfort zone, given these newer images from the scientific community. While many of us have understood the need to integrate these newer images into the way we organize and lead our organizations, we haven’t always known how to do it. Dialogue, as we will see, is tailor-made for helping us meet this challenge. It provides a process that helps us take full advantage of what the new sciences tell us about the inherent potential for self-organization and generativity resident in human systems. All we need to do is discern when and under what conditions to employ dialogue. As we do so, we will be rewarded by more adaptable, flexible, and sustainable organizations.

Organizations as Self-Organizing Holograms: A Blending of the Old and the New Ways of Organizing and Managing

Consider the picture on the next page that depicts aspects of how we organize and manage coming out of a Newtonian versus a quantum worldview."
Dispel any concerns you may have about giving up such structural ways of operating as hierarchy and top/down decision making, all contained in the inner circle. Over a certain domain, these Newtonian principles operate very well. The quantum worldview augments our capacity for meeting the challenges of today’s world: the rapid acceleration of change and the greater, more complex reality that we are facing. It has more explanatory power and suggests alternative ways of working together. It also helps us address the core dilemmas that come about with accelerating change and complexity. The outer circle can help us engage and work with these dilemmas without throwing out anything from the past. Hierarchy can still be a useful organizing principle, though you may find it operating in service of a larger view. What we are suggesting is that you add a few things to what you already do and be prepared to discover new interweavings for structuring relationships emerging in the system.

**Some of Our Core Dilemmas**

Ways of operating in the outer circle also address many of the more intractable organizational problems that we face today, such as:

- **The alienation of the workforce.** The lack of meaning and motivation and increasing levels of apathy that accompany downsizings, layoffs, restructuring, mergers, etc.

- **The integration of diversity.** Our struggle to find ways for leveraging the full extent of our diverse workforce, while at the same time addressing the increasing conflict that often arises when cultural, racial, religious, and gender differences are encountered.

- **The constant running we do from one fire to the next.** How do we stem the tide of crisis management when organizations face downsizing and cost containment at the same time?

- **Making sense of increasing levels of complexity and size.** How do we move information up, down, and across large and complex organizations? How do we get it there in a timely way to those who need it most? How can we provide it in ways that help make sense of what is going on in the organization as a whole?

- **Creating alignment around vision.** As organizations decentralize and grow in size, how are they to hold themselves together through shared vision?

- **Moving beyond one right answer.** As the world speeds up and the paradoxical nature of reality becomes more and more obvious, how do we hold multiple viewpoints and still move ahead with aligned action?

As our comfort level increases in moving back and forth between the two circles, we will find a larger capacity to address these core dilemmas. We will increase our ability to more rapidly adapt to problems as they arise and to face what has been coined as the “permanent white-water” of modern life.

Dialogue as a communication practice helps us navigate more effectively in the outer circle. As conditions warrant and we gain more capability, we will find ourselves naturally moving between both the old and new ways of working. Whether we use dialogue or another approach for operating in the outer circle will depend on the context and the nature of the situation we are facing. Whether we even move out to the outer circle at all will depend on many variables including how ready we are to engage in dialogue and its principles. Let’s look at each of these pie slices one at a time.

**Focus on Structure and Tasks**

**Focus on Relationship and Process**

When we thought that reality consisted only of concrete matter, we divided ourselves up into discreet units and organized ourselves along specific job lines. We paid a lot of attention to how we structured the tasks that our work consisted of. We still do. Consider all the latest business books on re-engineering and downsizing.

From quantum physics and self-organizing systems theory, we know that reality is essentially
defined by relationship and process. Every one of us depends on and is impacted by the work, actions, and ideas of everyone else. We perform our work in tightly woven and interconnected webs of interdependent parts. In reality, structure often takes a back seat to the quality of the relationships that are present and the processes or ways we go about getting our work done.

To meet current challenges, we must explore building climates that support the development of quality relationships and how we can place more conscious attention on how we get our work done together. A communications practice such as dialogue can play a vital role in developing both of these capacities.

**Power and Control**

**Shared Leadership**

When all we knew was that organizations operated like machines, we vested our leaders with the formal power, authority, and control we thought they needed to ensure the results we were looking for. We believed that we had to do this because, after all, machines are inanimate objects without the power to do work unless we provide the initial thrust. And, machines need to be controlled because they cannot think for themselves. Our idea of leadership in this older view of the world says that the person at the top should act as the brains for the whole organization. Everyone else just does what they are told to do.

At times this is an extremely useful way of seeing organizations. Imagine what would happen if a fire broke out in a skyscraper. Would you want everyone to take their time coming to consensus about what is the best way to evacuate the building? Or, would you prefer that the person in charge quickly take control of the situation and order the evacuation plan ASAP? In some crisis situations, the use of power and control is essential.

But what if, on the other hand, we aren't facing an emergency at all? What if what we want is greater adaptability and creativity to reside in the organization? We can't order these highly prized qualities. We have to take the time to build into our organization the norms for shared leadership that will get us there. We want to move towards a climate of collaborative partnership that dialogue can help us build.

**Top/Down Decisions**

**Shared Meaning and Consensus**

Top/down decision making works well with power and control exercised at the top. The flow of decisions arises at the top and is disseminated to the troops below. Easy and efficient, this method can lead to rapid results over the near term.

But what if what we want are quantum leaps in productivity? This implies more of a shared meaning, consensual process. We know that people work harder and are more motivated when they have been involved in making decisions affecting them.

This does not mean that we need consensus to order pencils every other month. This would be a silly waste of time. Routine, trivial decisions do not need to be consensual at all.

But when there is an important decision to be made that affects people in significant ways, developing shared meaning and consensus can be one of the best strategies to use for gaining the investment of all concerned. We all know that we have more incentive to change what we are doing if we have had a say in making the change itself. We also know that we tend to resist making changes when we are merely ordered to make them.

The use of dialogue is helpful when we are looking towards building shared meaning and consensus.
Competition
Collaboration/Community

Darwin’s idea of survival of the fittest gave us powerful reasons to believe that the world operated on a dog-eat-dog basis. Beating the competition was equated with winning in life and everything that was good and useful about how to organize ourselves. It is deeply grooved into our western psyches.

From the quantum perspective, we notice the inherent limitations. Competition works within certain bounds, but does not meet all contingencies of life as we used to believe.

In the short run, competition can unleash incredible amounts of energy as individuals see what is at stake in beating their opponent. In the long run, however, collaboration will typically work better. When two individuals pool what they both know about a task and combine efforts, a huge leap in productivity is often the result. Think about two companies that currently compete. What could happen if they joined forces and became one combined company? In macroeconomic theory, it is postulated that at a certain stage of industrial development, prior competitors can maximize or make more efficient their joint productivity by merging efforts. In an early stage of development, however, its separate entities competing will allow each to differentiate themselves with respect to the other.

So, in the short run, we can see the value of competition with outside entities. And in the long run, it can be beneficial to combine efforts and collaborate. Witness all the industrial consolidations we are seeing lately. If we view this as a natural pattern of organization at a certain stage of development, then we can understand why there is also so much need for creating cultures of collaboration and partnership.

Competing internally against those whose work we depend on for task completion is counterproductive. Yet we do this all the time. We even reward each other in ways that perpetuate this kind of dysfunctional competition. Why so? Because we have used competition for so long that our behaviors are based on it. We aren’t conscious at times that we have these kinds of disconnects in our organizations. If we are aware of them, we may not have the communication skills to support collaboration. We need to become aware of the results produced by communication patterns based on a competitive ethos. Otherwise, nothing we may try will move us closer to collaboration. Dialogue can play an instrumental role.

Self-mastery
Collective Mastery and Leveraging Diversity

We all know that it is hard today to get much done on our own. Work has become increasingly specialized and complex. This in turn creates increasing pressure on teamwork for desired results. Where we used to only develop individuals and called it self-mastery, we are now in need of developing whole teams and can call it collective mastery. Integration of tasks and seeing how everything fits together is key. Specialization alone without integration doesn’t get us very far. Collective mastery builds on self-mastery.

Once again, communication is essential. But, consider what is typical today in our organizations. We throw teams together to accomplish a complex task. We ask them to collaborate and to self-organize themselves. We provide them with little to no support in the way of interpersonal skills that would help them accomplish the task. Then we wonder what went wrong. We usually chalk it up to personality conflicts or poor management. We reorganize the team or bring in a team-building expert. We don’t recognize that what it is we want them to do, they are not prepared to do. We don’t see that the fundamental problem is communication. When a group of individuals come together who have few collective mastery skills, they continue to act as individuals—separately, with a lot of different and conflicting agendas.

Again, dialogue rests on the idea that we live in a world that is collective in nature with interconnected parts. Dialogue can help us
see the interconnections in our work with others and can help build the capacity to leverage the team’s inherent diversity. It can bring collective mastery to close-knit teams and task forces.

**Linear Thinking**

**Systems Thinking**

In Newtonian reality, we saw things as simple cause and effect. We prided ourselves on our ability to analyze data and to make projections based on trends and simple curves. From chaos theory and nonlinear-systems theory, we know that simple cause and effect is the exception rather than the norm. What is more common are complex interaction effects, which limit our ability to predetermine much in advance. These move beyond the simple A leads to B leads to C to consider how C also impacts and is impacted by both A and B. In other words, the arrows move in several directions rather than just from left to right.

What this means practically is that rather than spending so much of our time in planning for the future by extrapolating past trends, we could benefit from spending time in developing our ability to communicate about complex relationships and system interactions. Why? Because what matters is our ability to recognize the interplay between interdependent events, processes, and entities. Systems thinking is a step in this direction. A communication process such as dialogue can allow us to see into complex inter-relationships, a capability essential in meeting the increasing numbers of systemic problems we face today.

**One Right Answer**

**Many Right Answers/Paradox**

The Newtonian worldview has it that there is one right or best answer to our problems and that everything can be objectively determined. This idea was what created our experimental physical sciences.

Researchers became objective observers of life around them and sought to discover how the world works definitively.

What we now understand from the quantum worldview is that often what is so is paradox and many “right” or “best” answers. It tells us there are no absolutely objective answers, that the observer him/herself influences the answer based on the expectations or intention brought to the act of observing.

When faced with difficult choices where complexity and paradox are present, it may be more useful to entertain many answers and experiment with what works as we move along. To operate in this way, open-ended communication, such as dialogue, is imperative. Otherwise we narrow the field of potential choices and do not permit the largest view of reality to be perceived.

**Fragmentation**

**Holistic**

Based on Newtonian physics, we have been taught from a very early age to break everything down into smaller and smaller components. If something isn’t working, we quickly analyze where the problem is and go after the cause to fix it. Just like a broken part in a clock, we might decide to replace a problem employee or redo a certain way we have structured a job assignment. For simple problems, this is often the best approach to take.

Based on the new sciences perspective, our world actually is one whole. So, for more complex dilemmas, such as are found in cross-industrial problems or in projects that cross functional lines, it is our ability to see problems within the context of a system as a whole that matters. To develop this capacity, once again, the ways in which we communicate are essential.

When we employ discussion, for example, we compete for which view is correct. We do not stand back and try to see the larger problem arising from the common threads of the various points of view. In
dialogue, seeing these common threads is the intention. We are there to learn about the largest vision of what it is we are considering together.

Shared meaning and shared leadership are the pivotal elements for operating in the outer ring of the model. Dialogue is a way to get there.

We have covered a lot of ground. If you were to remember just one key thing from this chapter that might help you operate in the outer circle it is this: Pay attention to shared meaning and shared leadership. Both are essential in the creation and sustainability over time of collaborative work environments. By learning and practicing dialogue, team members will begin to develop the capability to intentionally create shared meanings coherent with their actions and results. Alignment around vision and during task implementation will increase. Individuals will begin to share in the leadership function by taking personal initiative and responsibility for attaining the vision desired.

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THE LARGER QUESTIONS

"Now we approach the difficult question from the practical person—what is to be done? What sorts of actions and programs do the foregoing arguments suggest?"

Harmon Markeley

If you believe that the modern organization is the single most powerful global institution in the world today, this alone is a powerful motivation to expand the ways in which we organize and operate. We are the carriers and shapers of world culture. The social and cultural ramifications of how we operate and manage are essential in providing a model for organizations everywhere. All of us who work in organizations today need to be asking ourselves about how we treat people and how we make our decisions. Are we doing the best we can do? Can we find ways for engaging in dialogue as a strategy for creating a more humane and sustainable world?

Besides needing to be concerned with the cultural and social ramifications of how we run our organizations, what about our need to contend with consequences of increasing technological sophistication? Our technologies are both valuable to us and are the source of many of our problems. We are facing worldwide crises coming from increasing pollution, environmental and ecological concerns, and increasing gaps between the rich and the poor. Can we find ways for employing