

13

A Self-Organizing Leadership View of Paradigms

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On hearing news of a new company-wide training program, a weary manager expressed his frustration over the waves of such programs he had seen come and go over the last few years. When someone disagreed, noting that this one seemed to have some real potential, he responded, "Just wait—after a few months of beat-to-fit and paint-to-match, it will look like everything else that's rolled through here." Unfortunately for the company, his prediction was accurate. And even more unfortunately for all of us, the same process is being played out almost daily in offices and plants around the country.

There is growing recognition in the business world that old assumptions and methods seem to work less and less often. An abundance of new ones are being offered, but how to choose? Quality circles? Self-Managed Teams? Power of Positive Thinking? Ropes Courses? Total Quality Management? Just in Time? At an alarming rate, and in every domain (not just business), landmarks are crashing down or just slowly dissolving into what seems at times an ever-thickening fog of conflicting

theories, dictums and predictions. From time to time a startling new idea comes along that seems to sweep the fog away and make the landscape clear once again. But, just as quickly, another new idea and, then another one, comes on its heels and the fog drops like a wet blanket, thicker than ever.

Even when a path seems clear, implementation of the change looms as an even larger challenge. For business leaders struggling to introduce fundamental change in order to better equip their organizations to meet a rapidly changing environment, it can seem at times as if there is some invisible, inordinately powerful gravitational force that works against movement or, if movement does occur, slowly but inevitably draws things back toward their original conditions. Every once in a while, fundamental lasting change seems to occur in some corner of one's own or someone else's business. But then, most frustrating of all, when the apparent causes are duplicated elsewhere, the results too often are the same cycle of resistance and regression.

In fact, such a force does exist, and it is both invisible and inordinately powerful. That it is invisible does not, however, mean it cannot be seen, only that we must learn new ways of seeing. And as to its inordinate power, it is a little like the Wizard of Oz. Once seen, we realize that we ourselves are the source of its power. This paper is about learning to see and to utilize this force in order to bring leadership to the self-creation of our organizations as "self-organizing leaders".

The Ties That Bind

The force we refer to is the paradigm (sometimes called "world view") that we and fellow members of our society, adhere to. Thomas Kuhn, who is generally credited with developing the paradigm concept in 1947, described the role of paradigms in the shaping of all scientific thought in his enormously influential book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published in 1962.

Soon after his ideas were published, they were being applied to all of human society. In the process, the word

"paradigm" took on a life of its own and unfortunately, not always one that does justice to the original depth and power of Kuhn's work. Our intent here is to recapture the potential of his paradigm concept so it can be applied as an instrument of a new and powerful form of leadership which we call self-organizing leadership.

Jeremy Rifkin once described paradigms as having a "hold over our perception of reality so overwhelming that we can't possible imagine any other way of looking at the world". Scientist John Casti's metaphor gives us a glimpse of how this works. Casti compares our knowledge of the world to the *terra incognita* of ancient mapmakers, and a paradigm to the map that evolves through a series of explorations and adjustments. At first fairly crude, its details are filled in with each new wave of returning explorers, often creating confusion in the initial stages, but ultimately creating a widely accepted picture of reality.

This analogy is helpful to understanding the construction as well as the function of a paradigm. One need only recall the experience of trying to reach a destination in a strange city. Without a map, we have no way of knowing where to look, how to plan, little or nothing by which to orient ourselves. In attempting to understand how a paradigm binds us to it with such an overwhelming "hold over our perception of reality", we must analyze how a map and a paradigm differ, rather than how they are similar. When we use a map, we know that it is no more than an instrument for guidance which may or may not be current. As we move about, we use our own perceptions and experiences to continuously assess its accuracy and make choices about how much to rely on it. In contrast, we treat our paradigm as the territory (reality) itself rather than someone's best estimate of it.

Most of us remain unaware of our paradigm and unable to separate ourselves from it. As a result, without our knowledge or our choice, it shapes what we are able to see and, therefore, what we are able to do. If a map fails to conform to what we encounter on our walk through the city, we assume it is outdated and either look for a new one or strike out on our own.

When we encounter events that do not fit our paradigm's picture of reality, however, our response is to ignore or rationalize away the conflicting evidence.

Of Maps, Paradigms, and Leadership

There are increasing indications that the chaos we are experiencing is the result of trying to navigate a 20th Century world using a 17th Century map and, most important, not being able to distinguish between the map and the world. The last sixty years have been rich with the discoveries of new geographer/explorers, but so firmly entrenched is our 17th Century picture of reality, that we exhibit remarkable inventiveness and determination in our drive to beat-to-fit and paint-to-match every new and "world shaking" discovery. When we do so we have succumbed, once again, to the force of our own mind's attachment to the old map or paradigm, no matter how inconsistent it seems to be with our own experience in the new territory. And each time we do so, we have created a small act of murder—the murder of our own potential as creative beings.

So what's a leader to do? Returning to Casti's analogy, when the reports of discrepancies between the standard map, and what had been actually observed reached a certain level, the Society of Explorers determined that it was time "to shift their allegiance to a new firm of mapmakers whose pictures of the territory seemed more in line with the reports of the returning adventurers". Unfortunately for today's business leader trying to steer her or his firm through newly bewildering territory, there is no Society of Explorers to collect data and determine the validity of the maps. Even if there were, new discoveries and new interpretations are now coming so rapidly that no central authorizing body could possibly keep up. We find ourselves confronting not only new and unknown challenges, but also a plethora of maps and mapmakers, each proclaiming the truth of their map. More and more, each business leader must sort through the explorers' reports, comparing them with their personal experience and inner knowledge, to become, if not their own mapmaker, at least a more capable judge of maps.

This capability is key to Self-Organizing Leadership -- a new form of leadership needed to meet the challenges and opportunities of a transition time. The central role of these leaders will be to reach out beyond the confining boundaries of the existing maps through seeing and anticipating the new order as it unfolds, and through creating visions that guide themselves and others to see and participate in the creation of their own destiny—as organizations and individuals. To be able to do so, they must first build the capability to see and to organize their own thinking as a means of seeing and making choices about the paradigm that will guide them and their organization. It is exactly for this purpose that Kuhn's structural definition of paradigms is so powerful.

A Structural View of Paradigms

Scientists have long known the power of understanding something in terms of its underlying structure. Kuhn's work moved us from a philosophical concept of a "world view" to the more utilitarian theory of "paradigm" which he defined as a "constellation of group commitments" shared by a particular (scientific) community. These key elements, adapted somewhat to apply here, are:

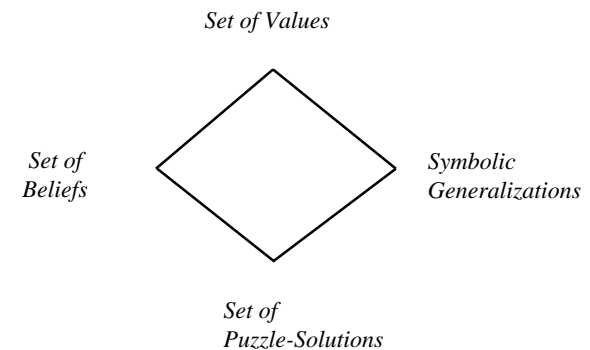
- **Symbolic Generalizations.** Deployed without question or dissent by group members, they often take on the appearance of laws of nature, and serve as banners around which a community forms its goals. Frequently represented in formula or slogan form, they trigger in the mind a fixed set of relationships and consequences.

- **A set of beliefs in particular models of reality.** These models supply us with “preferred or permissible analogies and metaphors”—a powerful means of communicating ideas, knowledge and understanding, while at the same time stimulating and focusing the community’s response to its environment. In particular, these analogies and metaphors define, and thereby limit us to, what is “real”, what is possible and what is impossible, and shape our priorities accordingly.

- **A set of fundamental values.** We use these values to validate or discard theories that explain and predict how events relate, and unfold. These values provide a touchstone for measuring whether something is on or off course.

- **A set of Puzzle-Solutions or shared exemplars.** It is these shared exemplars (in business: case studies, on-the-job training, etc.) which may have the greatest impact on reinforcing and communicating a particular paradigm. Through the sharing of these approaches, we crystallize within ourselves a “time-tested and group-licensed way of seeing”. These are profoundly useful social instruments. However, when we divorce them from the belief-based models and value-based theories from which they derive their validity, they become instead powerful shackles that tie us to the past, even if we no longer believe in it.

Putting this constellation of elements into graphic form, we might depict their structure as follows:



In this structured view of paradigms, our beliefs shape the motivation behind our actions, while the symbolic generalizations serve to shape the goals toward which our actions are

aimed. Our values help us monitor and guide the direction of our actions while the puzzle solutions shape the way we carry them out.

We can use Kuhn's structure as a "mapreading" instrument that can help leaders organize their thinking to see how their current "map" or paradigm now shapes daily business activities. This structure also provides a framework for understanding, assessing and integrating the work of the new geographers and explorers into a new map to better guide business adventures.

Mechanical Paradigm

The current, and currently unravelling, Machine Age or Mechanical Paradigm has held sway in the western world for over three hundred years. While it has evolved over this period, it has retained many fundamental premises which still dominate the infrastructure of thinking and organizing in modern business. One of the core beliefs that set it apart from its predecessors was the gift of Isaac Newton -- that all of nature could be subjected to the laws of mathematics. In a world run by immutable, completely knowable and observable laws, a mechanical model is a natural outcome. With machine as metaphor, the major preoccupation became the creation and sustenance of a stable environment conducive to the unbroken production of material worth. Error and degradation are our enemies; control of nature their remedy. As Locke wrote, "...land that is left wholly to nature... is called, as indeed it is, waste."

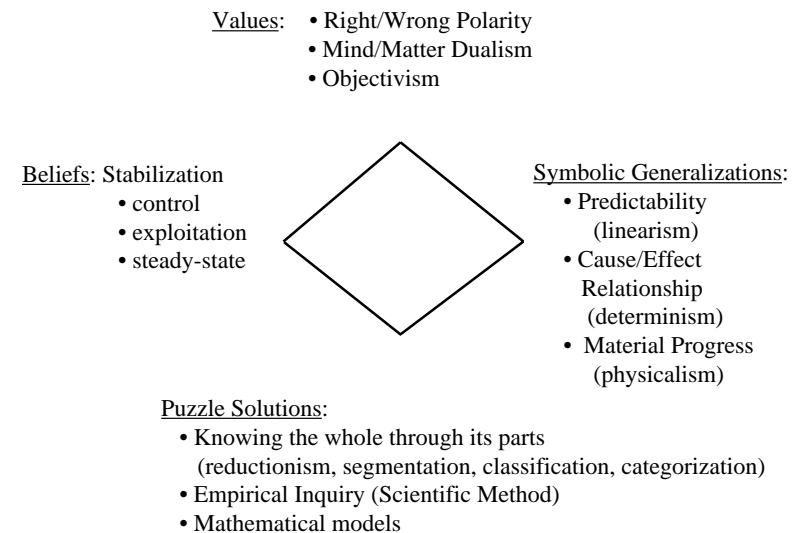
On the value point, René Descartes and Francis Bacon both contributed to the value for "objective" knowledge that marks this paradigm. From Descartes came the faith that we could master the world by unraveling its truths, and the conviction that there is always a "right" answer to be found. In a world that values sharply defined good and bad, any theory (or person) that doesn't point to an orderly, predictable sequence of events toward desired goals is quickly discarded.

As to symbolic generalizations, "progress" and cause/effect became the banners behind which scientists, politicians

and business people have marched with full confidence that, if we are diligent, hard working and hard nosed, life will proceed in a straight line with each stage materially better than the last.

Bacon's gift to this world view was the ideal puzzle-solution—the Scientific Method—a tidy and "purely objective" means of ascertaining the nature of the "real" world that relied on the belief that we could segment the messy world of nature into tidy little packets which could be measured, analyzed and categorized. It worked so well in the physical world, that its carryover to the world of living beings was almost a foregone conclusion. People became subject to, and could be understood in terms of, the same mechanical laws as machines. What couldn't be studied objectively was dismissed as irrelevant.

Using Kuhn's paradigm structure, we could depict the underlying structure of the Mechanical Paradigm as follows:

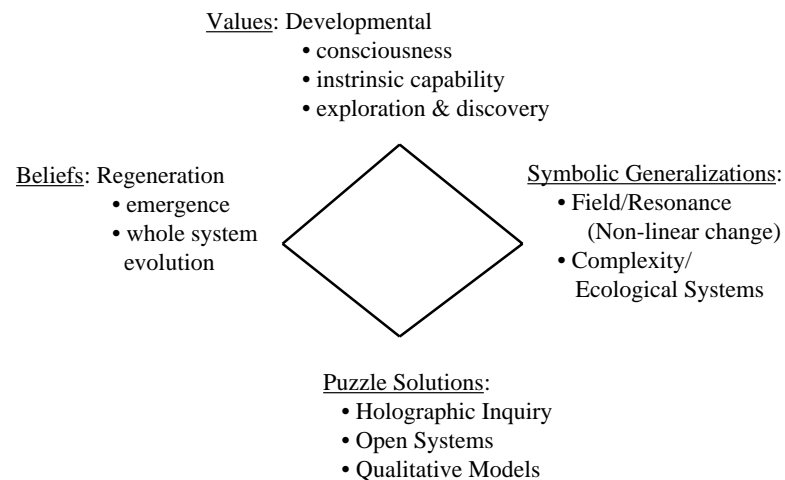


The Emerging Paradigm

While there is growing consensus that the current turbulence marks the emergence of a new paradigm, there is less agreement on the precise makeup of that paradigm, and therefore on what to call it. To avoid the controversy of labeling something that is still in process, we call it here simply the Emerging Paradigm. There is, however, growing agreement on its general nature and some of its key landmarks.

Instead of the cool clockwork of an hermetically sealed universe run according to immutable laws and driven by the need for stabilization, we see emerging a view of a constantly changing and dynamic world of interconnected systems in which chaos is a nurturing environment for the spontaneous regeneration of increasingly higher orders of creation.

Using Kuhn's map-reading instrument, we could depict the current understanding of the Emerging Paradigm's underlying structure as follows:



Many of the ideas of the Emerging Paradigm are, in fact, quite ancient ones that are being given new depth and scientific underpinnings by a growing body of scientific and philosophical "explorer/geographers" who are nourishing its emergence. These include, but are by no means restricted to, such people as Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Ilya Prigogine, Erich Jantsch, David Bohm, Gregory Bateson, Rupert Sheldrake, and Karl Pribram.

Symbolic Generalizations.

Because business is fundamentally concerned with change—in particular, how to create and manage it—the emerging concepts in this area are in many ways the most profoundly unsettling, with enormous implications for how we structure and conduct our businesses.

Most of our goals and practices around creating and managing change are still shaped by two related concepts about the nature of change that developed in the earliest stages of the Mechanical Paradigm and are now deeply embedded in our culture. Physicalism/Determinism hold that all change is the result of the direct application of energy to matter, and that there is a directly traceable cause for every effect, and vice versa; the related concept of linearism holds that once launched (by the hand of man), change marches forward in a straight line. Implied in this is the expectation that we can indeed control change, but only if we are directly involved in it. In addition, non-directed change—change not visibly resulting from our effort—is seen only as an aberration, a variance from the plan. In fact, it is abundantly clear to any one in business for more than a few years that control of change is more illusion and desire than reality, and just about the only predictable thing about change is that we can never predict all of its "side" or nonlinear effects. Yet managers continue to feel trapped by, on the one hand, the business's need to change more and more rapidly over greater and greater spans, and, on the other hand, the expectation that they must be "in control" of and directly involved in that change in order to manage it.

Moving toward a new paradigm, the work of biochemist Rupert Sheldrake and other researchers presents us with a

concept of change as transmittable through an invisible non-material field of living energy. Sheldrake, who describes the process as “reality is habit forming,” postulates that we create a kind of memory, a set of assumptions and patterns, in our social fields, which conditions the way everyone in that field sees things. When a shift in these patterns reaches a critical threshold, it becomes pervasive beyond any space and time connection. In effect, it creates a new field to which people resonant, causing new habits for the social group. Learning becomes easier for each succeeding group because the field in which they exist is forming a new pattern and reconditioning the whole, a phenomenon we have seen now in several businesses. Once the threshold has passed, the new learning does not even need to be taught—it is just known by all within that field.

Puzzle Solutions.

One of the most far-reaching advances of the Mechanical Paradigm was the scientific method—the puzzle-solving process that seemed to bring order to messy, disorderly nature through the process of segmentation, and categorization or classification. Unfortunately, as the machine metaphor extended to people as well as the universe, and “non-measurable” dimensions such as consciousness, spirit, and thinking were discounted as irrelevant, the scientific method was distorted into a source for categorizing and segmenting people by type, and organizing them based on hierarchical and categorical classes. As a result, we began to lose the ability to see the wholeness of each individual and their uniqueness in a business enterprise setting. We developed a wide array of fine-tuned and costly instruments for categorizing, classifying and segmenting the performance of people. We take almost any process that could help us understand the totality of ourselves individually and collectively, and convert it to a segmenting tool. As a result we are losing, or have lost, the valuing of diversity needed to gain wholeness and to support the heterostatic processes of regeneration required to survive in our rapidly changing environment.

What are some of the hallmarks of an organization trapped in the segmentation model? People identify, and relate to,

themselves and others as “types” on a packaged, pre-set behavioral classification model. Racism, sexism and classism are often significant problems. Most sadly, people's ability to contribute is restricted not by their capability but by their job definition.

Stanford University brain researcher Karl Pribram and physicist David Bohm have articulated a theoretical base for developing and engaging consciousness based on a holographic metaphor in which the part is in the whole and the whole is in each part. What does this mean in a practical sense? As an example, instead of seeking to exclude “problem” people, we would recognize that they are only a reflection of the health of the whole system, and can even help us identify where the system is not working. It also means that we can be connected to the whole by selecting a holistic slice of the organization that is reflective of the whole (e.g. all functions, levels, perspectives) as the decision making team for an entity. These replace the hierarchical decision processes wherein a decision, even when made at the “appropriate level”, misses the whole and therefore misses critical considerations and learning processes.

The holographic model also requires us to look at each individual as unique, continuously developing and having the possibility of making an increasing value-adding contribution. Our challenge is to collaborate with people as a leader to discover, develop, and match that uniqueness to the contributions that are needed by the business.

Holographic thinking changes our perceptions about who are leaders. As Bob Porter, Dupont's Memphis plant manager reflected, “I have to catch myself, stop myself from thinking that all the communication and leadership is my job. Watching an operator or a mechanic stand in front of his peers and superiors (including me), providing leadership to major change efforts and projects is really inspirational to me. What I am living is a fundamental change in the way I always thought about being a leader, but I feel really alive”. In a similar vein, Rod Lawrence, Operations Manager of James River Paper, recently stated, “For the last few years, multi-level development has been our standard. I didn't know how rich and creative this was until I was

put in a more traditional process. I really feel poorer when I'm not learning with operators on a regular basis".

Values

The great seductiveness of the universe-as-machine metaphor and the scientific method, was their promise that, as an impartial and separate observer, one could finally understand the universe completely and finally know the right answers to age-old questions. Unfortunately, we have become a culture dominated by bi-polar thinking, driven by the search for the "right" answer and certain that if we do not "know" the answer, we are doomed to failure. Furthermore, our value for separation of mind and matter often leads us to mistake facts for truth in that search.

Almost every facet of our educational system is based on value for having the right answers, the facts—our knowledge of the answer is our measure of our progress, first in school, then in business. When we don't have the answers, we hire consultants and experts to give them to us. At best, this polarity gives us an incomplete understanding; at worst it gives us dogma, tyranny, and war in our political and social contexts.

Gregory Bateson's work on learning how to learn postulates that it is possible to emerge into new thinking only when we can adopt a non-dualistic view of the world, one where mind and matter are not separated as Descartes had advocated. He felt that because of this dichotomy, we endanger accuracy and learning by the demand for objectivity (looking for only what we can see and count by using our senses in the material world). By this process we make life and interactions "thing-like" and therefore lose the spirit and higher values that we so wish for in our lives and organizations. As alternates, he offers value based theories for building new learning processes that allow us to see the world in a new way, to see relationships between multiple parts in a complex living system.

To be able to move our organization beyond duality, we need a model of development that includes consciousness and capability and thrives on diversity and wholeness. Charles Krone has differentiated development from growth and learn-

ing as a way of understanding how being guided by development in the Emerging Paradigm differs from the growth-dominated model of the mechanical paradigm. Growth, which has a fixed end point and requires nutrients from the environment, is a precondition to development, but is not sufficient in the emergent paradigm. Development is the process of increasing our scope and power to do and to be. It is more focused on bringing potential, that which has not yet been manifested, into actuality. Unlike growth, its source of nourishment is from within. We can only develop by doing something new or by causing movement in a new direction, taking on something we do not readily know how to do. This places a demand on us to find more of ourselves, to learn more about ourselves, and to develop more in ourselves.

Conclusion

The next generation of business vision will come from those able to disrupt their own, and others', currently dominant patterns of thinking. One source for this "self-disruption" is the rapidly advancing wave of discoveries being made by emerging paradigm explorers. The holographic and holistic nature of their work has made possible a rapid extension of their fundamental premises to all domains of business—not just the technology—and at a rate unmatched in human history. A second source for new vision is the creativity that emerges as leaders develop the flexibility and confidence to become explorers themselves and lead explorations into the unknown.

Finding ways to tap into these emerging discoveries, and then to uncover one's own capability to see new and previously unperceivable and unconceivable approaches, is both the opportunity and the challenge for those who would become self-organizing leaders—those leaders who will guide the self-creation of their organizations' and of their own destinies.