



Designing for Organizational Transformation: Key Ideas in Creating a Coherent, Continuously Emerging System

Srik Gopalakrishnan and Bob Hill

All of us want the organizations in which we work to make sense to us and to provide us a place where we can see meaning and importance derived from our contributions. We could describe such an organization as a learning organization, or one that is coherent and continuously emerging in service to getting the results it desires. Several organizational theorists have described the characteristics of a learning organization, which include the following:

- Knowledge generation is the work of everyone, without regard to job role or organizational position.
- Knowledge is valued for its impact on practice (what workers do) and the concurrent impact of that practice on the goals of the organization.
- Information and knowledge are ubiquitous and accessible to every person in the system.
- Leadership is democratic and distributed.
- The goals of the system, the functions designed for meeting those goals, and the structures in which those functions are enacted are coherent.
- The work of the system is networked at and across all levels and for all workers regardless of job role.

Unfortunately, most of us also have experienced times when the organizations in which we work seem to be in the way of our deriving meaning and success rather than supporting those outcomes. The good news, however, is that a compelling body of research exists that shows us the feasibility of our creating and sustaining the workplaces that we desire.

In thinking about how to create a coherent, continuously emerging system, we consider three key

continued on p. 2

Inside Review	
Page 5 Questions for Reflection	Page 6 A Learning Journey With Myron Rogers
	Page 7 How Design Teams Work: Some Guidelines

Designing for Organizational Transformation

continued from page 1

ideas:

- The notion of **complexity** in our organizations and the relationship complexity has with change,
- The importance of acting on a set of **simple rules** in order to navigate complexity,
- The significance of **leaderful behavior** and the role of leaders in applying the simple rules in everyday practice.

This article offers a succinct look at these three key ideas. It is intended to provide an entry point to the design of coherent and continuously emerging organizations.

Complexity and Change

To anyone who views our world as a galaxy of dynamic human systems, the notion of complexity is a good thing. Most of the time when we think of the term complexity we call up a view of a problem or challenge that truly tests our mettle, our creativity, our perseverance and our ability to work together and communicate clearly. This is the definition of complexity that would help us build the intricate, connected and vibrant organizations that we hope to live into, to gather in for fellowship and fun, or to share our humanity with others. When we do so, we display a fundamental understanding of the world around us as we create elegant connections with other people and other elements of our world.

An entire science exists today that studies and maps the relationships that we build in our organizations.

People or work groups commonly are named *nodes* in these studies. What we know about organizations is that they thrive and grow beyond their imagined limits in proportion to the presence of these nodes and the quality of their interconnectedness. When robust relationships are built among diversely talented nodes, the system becomes complex in the positive sense of the term and exhibits the ability to adapt to its challenges, both those that show up inside the system and those that appear from outside it.

One of the first steps to becoming a learning organization is to embrace change and seek to build complexity as a capacity of the system in which we work. In our old machine view of the world, we believed that change showed up in a linear fashion and could be manipulated or controlled in every instance. The organizations created in that bureaucratic mindset fit perfectly in the world view held at that time. But today we recognize the limitations of that paradigm. We know that adaptation and emergence cannot be planned out and executed in the traditional planning models that drove organizations in the 20th century. The new paradigm demands a level of elegance in dealing with complex, constantly changing systems. That elegance is brought forth through what we refer to as *simple rules*.

Acting on Simple Rules

Organizations are consciously or unconsciously driven by a set of underlying rules that govern human action.

However, we can be intentional in calling out a desired set of simple rules or principles that we think have the potential to create the positively reinforcing conditions that we desire. In other words, we can make explicit the simple rules that can be put into action to help the organization move toward its envisioned future.

These simple rules would be grounded in theory, research, experience and practice of stakeholders. It is critical that stakeholders identify, understand, own, value and commit to these simple rules and that their structures, processes, relationships and practices reflect these simple rules. The simple rules help individuals know how to function together to live out the foundational beliefs and values of the organization. They also inform the organizational work so that it conforms to the same foundational beliefs and values.

So how do the simple rules of a learning organization differ from rules and regulations of a bureaucracy? Bureaucratic rules are built on the premise that every situation can be predicted, so the practice guidelines for the issue can be written in advance and people can be trained to implement them when those situations arise. Simple rules, on the other hand, are designed knowing that many situations are complex and influenced by variables that make prediction nearly impossible. Therefore, simple rules allow for human discretion and the application of knowledge and judgment when they are applied. For example, a simple rule such as “Build shared purpose,” helps people consciously pay attention to bringing people together

to build a sense of purpose for any task or initiative. How, specifically, this is done is left to human discretion based on the context and needs of the particular situation.

The work of those seeking meaningful organizational change is to support people in making the change from implementing the rules of a bureaucracy to applying the simple rules of an adaptive complex system. At a high level, that is the transformation of which we speak. This transfor-

One of the first steps to becoming a learning organization is to embrace change and seek to build complexity as a capacity of the system in which we work.

mation however cannot be brought about without the intentional reflective practice of everyone in the organization. This requires something extraordinary from everyone, not just the ones in formal leadership roles. We refer to these extraordinary actions and behaviors as *leaderful behavior*.

Leaderful Behavior and the Role of Leaders

In traditional bureaucratic systems, autocrats often gather power, make decisions, and issue directives. In some situations, systems have thrived when led in such a manner. But in today’s world one will not find successful learning organizations led by

continued on p. 4

Designing for Organizational Transformation

continued from page 3

autocrats. Instead, they are led by people whose belief is built upon a full body of evidence that organizations are most successful when leadership is shared and distributed. Some leadership theorists actually encourage leaders to give their power away.

The tricky thing about this however is that as necessary as good leadership is in a learning organization, it is not in and of itself sufficient to guarantee desired outcomes. In order to get not

The tricky thing is that as necessary as good leadership is in a learning organization, it is not in and of itself sufficient to guarantee desired outcomes.

just good but great organizations, everyone – every practitioner – must actualize a *theory of action* that they understand at a deep level, that they share with colleagues, and that they can transmit to new members of the system. The theory of action should help each practitioner relate his or her actions and behaviors to the set of organizational simple rules and maintain resilience in the midst of change.

There is something more to this kind of leadership than what we have typically seen, although formal or positional leadership still plays a vital role. At the level of self, every person

can develop a professional discipline in concert with peers that steers them in this direction. Skills can be taught that enhance the likelihood of individuals holding these competencies and acting on them. The exercise of professional practice at the level of self is what we refer to as leaderful behavior.

What, then, is the role of leaders? The role of leaders is to continuously create and nurture the conditions that make the exercise of leaderful behavior the everyday culture throughout the system. Doing so requires the public demonstration of their own leaderful behavior, in other words, always making explicit and communicating their theory of action and how it relates to the organizational simple rules. That may well be the most awesome challenge in what leaders do.

Conclusion

We have so far talked about the relevance of the three key concepts – how the phenomenon of complexity can be a positive force in organizational change, how a set of intelligent simple rules can help us navigate and thrive in complexity and what would be required of us as practitioners and leaders in demonstrating leaderful behavior. In conclusion, we ask readers to take a moment to contemplate the questions on the following page about their own organizations and about themselves as organizational citizens. ■

Questions for Reflection

Organization

In what ways and to what degree is the organization I work in a learning organization (see characteristics of a learning organization on page 1)?

What or who are the key connections (nodes) in my organization?

Does my organization have an underlying set of simple rules? If so, are these explicit and do people talk about them?

How are the leaders of my organization demonstrating their leaderful behavior?

Individual

What am I doing to contribute to its being a learning organization?
What am I doing that is holding it back?

How am I connected to these nodes? What am I doing to create powerful connections?

Do I follow a set of simple rules?
How coherent are they with the organization's simple rules?

How am I demonstrating leaderful behavior? Would my colleagues see leaderful behavior in my practice?

Selected References

- Block, P. (2008). *Community: the structure of belonging*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Fullan, M. (2008). *The six secrets of change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hamel, G. (2007). *The future of management*. Boston: Harvard Business School.
- Holladay, R. & Quade, K. (2008). *Influencing patterns for change: a human systems dynamics primer for leaders*. Circle Pines, MN: Human Systems Dynamics Institute.
- Marshall, S. P. (2006). *The power to transform: leadership that brings learning and schooling to life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Senge, P. A. (1990). *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday Publishers.
- Wheatley, M. & Frieze, D. (2006). *Using emergence to take social innovations to scale*. www.margaretwheatley.com.

A Learning Journey With Myron Rogers

COMMENTARY

Bob Hill

Back in 1997, I was the Superintendent of Schools in Springfield (IL) Public Schools, and I was about to complete my term as President of the Large Unit District Association of Illinois. My colleague and peer, Dr. Norm Wetzels, presented me with the gift of the book *A Simpler Way*, written by Margaret Wheatley and Myron Rogers.

There is a sentence in *A Simpler Way* that caught my attention over a decade ago when I first read it:

“We encourage others to change only if we honor who they are now. We ourselves engage in change only as we discover that we might be more of who we are by being something different.”

When the opportunity presented itself to work with Myron Rogers I would rediscover the truth and the depth of wisdom contained therein.

Today, as a member of the Education Initiatives (EI) team at the Ball Foundation, one of my roles is to support and encourage change as I work with our school district partners. Only when I attempted to do that work did I begin to realize that if I wanted to be the consultant or coach that I aspired to be, I, too, would have to change. That is a powerful lesson.

In a moment of synchronicity generated by a snow storm, the EI team was introduced to Myron Rogers in

2003. In short order, we began a learning journey with him that greatly influenced our thinking and work from that time forward.

From 2004-2007, he and Education Initiatives team members Joann Ricci and Carla Colmenarez led the development of a community of practice in literacy instruction in the Chula Vista (CA) Elementary School District. This community eventually grew to include over half the schools in the district. Much of what EI does today in creating networks and communities of practice is based on what Myron taught us through this work in Chula Vista.

Specifically, he deepened our understanding of the theory, practice, and principles of change, communities of practice, learning, and design. These continue to show up in our work, for example, in the use of design teams. In Myron’s words, design teams “create capacity everywhere for designing and leading change; develop coherent change processes congruent with theory and principles; and integrate the ‘what’ and the ‘how.’” Design teams are “a fractal of an organization’s dynamics and culture.”

In the Fall 2006 edition of *Review*, we published an article about the use of design teams to engage our school district partners in creating and implementing the elements of our partnership work. The article contained a list of five descriptors of

how design teams do their work. These operational guidelines for design teams appear in the information that we use today to teach new design team members about this important work. The guidelines below were created by Myron Rogers and used in our work in Chula Vista and in all of our current work.

Another aspect of our work with school district partners influenced greatly by Myron Rogers is the harvesting of knowledge about our work that can be used to inform shared understanding and improved practice. Myron introduced us to a set of questions that can propel deep and rich conversations that tap the wisdom that resides in the systems in which we all work. Anyone working for change can use them to “define the work, design and deliver [processes], learn from the experience, and share learnings with the whole.”

As noted in the Fall 2008 edition of *Review*, these are the aforementioned questions:

- *What are we doing?* (shared understanding of goals and outcomes)
- *How are we doing it?* (understanding of and deepening expertise around shared practice)
- *How will we know we are doing it?* (understanding of and deepening expertise around ways to gather evidence for decision-making, including artifacts of student learning)
- *Who else needs to be in the conversation?* (understanding and honoring the wisdom that resides in the system)

In the near future, we will all be able to read a new book that Myron Rogers is writing based upon experiences that he shared with us and others in building communities of practice around the above set of questions. We are anxious to share this book with our partners and others who work for the transformation of schooling to learning.

In the past, we have unintentionally described elements of our work that have been created or influenced by Myron Rogers without appropriate attributing citations. For that we apologize. As many of you who have participated in learning activities that have been supported by the Ball Foundation know, we are grateful for the learning that Myron Rogers has made possible for us all, and we look forward to more of those opportunities in the future.■

How Design Teams Work: Some Guidelines *by Myron Rogers*

- Design team members should represent the many roles and perspectives within a system. They bring what they know from their role or perspective.
- Design team membership is typically voluntary, drawing on an individual’s own energy and enthusiasm for the work.
- Design teams can work at multiple levels. For example, a design team may come together to design a single, specific learning event, or a design team may be responsible for an entire systemic change process.
- Design team membership is fluid; a dynamic mix of experienced and new members enlivens a team with new voices while maintaining continuity.
- Members of the design team facilitate and take leadership roles during meetings and learning events. They pay attention to what is showing up in order to make changes in design—in the moment—if necessary.

The Ball Foundation is a family-funded operating foundation based in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. Established in 1975 by G. Carl Ball and Vivian Elledge Ball, it conducts programs in two areas: Career Vision and Education Initiatives. *Review*, the newsletter of Education Initiatives, is published three times a year. If you have any questions or comments please call 630.469.6270 or e-mail Rex Babiera, *Review* Editor, at rbabiera@ballfoundation.org.

Board Members

James Pearson, President
Peg Hendershot, Vice President
Bob Hildebrand
Paul Schneider

Anna Ball, Vice President
Nick Kaskovich, Treasurer/Secretary
Gary Jewel

Bob Hill, Vice President
Denis Doyle
Barrie Ricketts

Education Initiatives Staff Members

Bob Hill, Director
KaiLonnie Dunsmore
Barbara Iversen

Rex Babiera
Melody Euhus
JoAnn Lawrence

Carla Colmenarez
Srik Gopalakrishnan
Michael Palmisano

Copies of this newsletter are also available at www.ballfoundation.org. Articles may be reprinted with permission.