Leading into the Future I: An Introduction

William Bergquist, Ph.D.

"The Future Ain't What It Used to Be!" This is one of those classic lines from Yogi Berra. It's a statement that makes absolutely no sense.: "Of course the future is different from the past, that's why it's called the future you idiot!" Yet, like all of Yogi's comments, it addresses an essential truth and is rich with insight about the remarkable world in which we live. Yes, in some fundamental way, the future we now face is different in both substance and character from any future being faced by us in past years. We speak of this as an emerging "postmodern" world that defies traditional description, prediction or analysis. Given this postmodern condition, the title of this series of essays (Leading into the Future) makes no sense. Not only is the future different today from what it was in the past, planning for, organizing and leading on behalf of the future is a difficult if not absurd task for anyone to undertake. This series of essays is all about the challenging (and perhaps absurd) task of preparing for a future world that has not yet revealed itself.

I first attempted to project into the future when I wrote and published *The Postmodern Organization: Managing the Art of Irreversible Change* (Bergquist, 2003). Apparently, I was somewhat successful in taking on this task, having been identified by several organizational theorists as the founder of a new "postmodern" school of organizational theory. I would suggest that this honor is not appropriately assigned to me, since many other highly qualified and insight-filled theorists have journeyed into the domain of postmodernism as related to organizational functioning. (for example, Clegg, 1990; see also Hatch, 2006). However, I do take some credit for accurately predicting some of the trends in organizational life and in identifying some of the major challenges that would be facing organizational leaders during the last years of the 20th Century and first decades of the 21st Century. Most importantly, I did a fairly good job of describing a fundamental shift that was occurring in contemporary organizations and societies –the shift to a postmodern perspective and accompanying life patterns and priorities. And, it seems that the subtitle of my 1993 book was also accurate: these shifts are irreversible. Postmodernism is here to stay – until there is yet another seismic shift.

What is the nature of this postmodern condition and how does it relate to the other two societal forms that are still alive and well in our world (the premodern and the modern)? In this set of essays, I provide a systematic analysis of all three societies, while also paying attention to the unique challenges posed by the postmodern condition. I wish to set the stage for my analyses and postmodern portraits, by offering a few preliminary reflections in this essay on the nature of postmodernism as it operates in social systems.

The Postmodern Condition

Prophet, poets and social critics have declared that the modern world is dying or already dead. A new one is emerging in the new millennium to take its place. This new future is nothing like the past. We appear to be living and working on the edge of a new, postmodern era. We define everything by what it used to be (post-industrial, post-capitalist, post-Fordism, post-Marxist, post-cold war), but do not yet know what it will become.

This is the postmodern world and the organizations that reside in this world are postmodern organizations. These essays are devoted, in part, to an examination of contemporary organizations as they hover on the edge of a postmodern era. In particular, these essays are devoted to challenges facing the men and women who have chosen to lead these organizations. I will examine the parameters and characteristics of postmodern organizational forms and dynamics--comparing them to organizations that were functioning in the premodern and modern world (and that continue to function in the hybrid reality of our postmodern world). I will also suggest why the future we now face "ain't what it used to be" and propose ways in which leaders can best confront the unique characteristics of this new future and the new postmodern organization.

The postmodern edge is examined in these essays from several different perspectives. Perhaps this transitional era in which we now live is in fact a new future, rather than being merely a way station to a new future that has not yet been born. We may now be living not in the age of anxiety, but rather in the age of "edginess." A mid-west-bred educator (and student mine), with extensive business experience, described this era of edginess in terms of a popular film cartoon:

My current image of a past employer is almost a cartoon that many postmodern companies will reenact. It is Wiley Coyote back-pedaling madly, clawing at the ground

trying to stop as his inertia carries him to the precipice. There, the great cosmic road runner hovers in mid-air with a silly grin on its face. The coyote goes over and down silently, and with a look of utter chagrin. "Beep! Beep!" is the only communication heard.

In this postmodern era, men and women look for order in the midst of chaos, as they stand, like Wiley Coyote, poised on the edge or already over the edge of a psychological and organizational abyss.

Another of my mature and accomplished students (a middle-aged corporate executive) stated this point quite eloquently in his description of a moderately large corporation that he helped to found:

> Our people spend their time looking for the insignificant events; the events at the margin that can add order or stability to the complexities they live in. This reduces our effectiveness as an organization and ultimately limits our ability to survive in a very competitive marketplace. They are constantly looking for ways to reduce their frustrations and uncertainty by seeking and challenging the vision and leadership of the company. While we the senior management focus on growth and largeness, they focus on transitions. Our continuous play between chaos and order is reflected [in] our need to constantly be in meetings. Someone finds a chaotic situation and quickly calls the group together for resolution. Instead of making clear and concise decisions that are communicated to the organization we tend to increase the ambiguity in the company and clarify only the smallest of issues. We do not address with clarity the process required to make uncertainty easier to resolve for the organization.

Learning into the Future: On the Edge of Knowing

Living-on-the-edge is also exciting and addicting. It is a *threshold* experience. (Turner, 1969) This is what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls a *flow experience*. It brings us into the special realm that resides between boredom and anxiety. The edge is a boundary—the intersection between different systems and different cultures. It is at the edge or boundary of any system that we find maximum information and maximum unpredictability, for the edge is the point where a system is conducting transactions with the outside world.

This is the edge of knowing. Otto Sharmer (2009.p. 7) captures this notion of edgy knowledge when differentiating between learning from the past and learning from the future:

> . . . there are two different sources of learning: learning from the experiences of the past and learning from the future as it emerges. The first type of learning, learning from the past, is well known and well developed. It underlies all our major learning methodologies, best practices and approaches to organizational learning. By contrast, the second type of learning, learning from the future as it merges, is still by and large unknown."

Sharmer goes on to suggest that this second type of learning requires what he calls "presencing" – a combination of two words: "presence" and "sensing". These are processes that I suggest describe the edge of knowing. Thus, I am introducing not only the paradox of "leading into the future" but also the equally paradoxical notion of "learning into the future" and living on the edge of knowledge.

The edge of knowing holds great relevance for the leaders of many organizations that would be labeled postmodern in this set of essays—for these organizations are poised on the edge of chaos. This is not chaos, as it is usually defined in terms of anarchy or complete disorganization. Rather, as this term was originally being used, chaos is defined as a state of unpredictability and complexity—as a system in which order and disorder are in interplay with one another. These important insights regarding chaos were first offered in a burst of articles and books appearing during the late 1980s and early 1990s (for example, Gleick, 1987; Briggs and Peat, 1989).

More recently, during the 1900s and early 21st Century, this state has been reframed as *complexity* and attention turned to the nature of dynamic, adaptive systems (Kaufmann, 1996; Miller and Page, 2007: Page, 2011) In such a system, the capacity for knowing is maximized—as is the capacity for creativity (Stacey, 1996). In a complex, adaptive system, there are many "teachable moments" and opportunities for dramatic, second-order learning and change (Argyris and Schon, 1978).

An additional perspective will also be offered in this set of essays. The seemingly complex and chaotic nature of contemporary, postmodern organizations may be neither a transitional state in the life of many contemporary organizations, nor a more permanent state of affairs. The growing emphasis on postmodernism in contemporary organizations may instead be simply a part of our growing awareness

of and insight into the way(s) in which organizations have always run in our world—or at least the way in which they have operated for the past two centuries.

The basic condition of all organizations may have always been on the edge of order and chaos. Perhaps, as some system theorists would have us believe, the primary function of any organization (or any human enterprise, for that matter) is to snatch structure and order out of the mouth of the dragon of chaos. System theorists described this as the process of *entrop*y—the tendency of all systems to move toward disorder or chaos (the second law of thermodynamics). Many systems in our world, it would appear, can be best described as entities that hover on the edge of or move back and forth between states of order and chaos. Our journey through premodern, modern and postmodern societies, in this set of essays, will help us gain greater insight regarding how organizations (and social systems in general) have changed and have, at the same time, remained unchanged—hovering on the edge.

References

Argyris, C. and Schon, D. (1978). Organizational Learning. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Bergquist, W. (2003) *The Postmodern Organization*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Briggs, J. and Peat, F. D. (1989) *Turbulent Mirror*. New York: Harper-Collins.

Clegg, S. (1990) *Modern Organizations: Organizational Studies in the Postmodern World*. Newbury Park, Calif: Sage, 1990>

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990) *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper-Collins, 1990.

Gleick, J. (1987) *Chaos: Making a New Science*. New York: Viking Penguin.

Hatch, M. (2006) *Organizational Theory: Modern, Symbolic and Postmodern Perspectives*. 3rd Ed. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Kauffman, S. (1996) *At Home in the Universe: The Search for the Laws of Self-Organization and Complexity* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Miller, J. and Page, S. (2007). *Complex Adaptive Systems*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press

Page, S. (2011). *Diversity and Complexity*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Sharmer, C. O. (2009) *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Stacey, R. (1996), *Complexity and Creativity in Organizations*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Turner, V. (1969) *The Ritual Process*. Hawthorne, N.S.: Aldine.