

Leading into the Future VI: Postmodern Perspectives on Organizational Life

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The postmodernists tell us that boundaries and edges are the primary source of activity and information in any system. Furthermore, we can best understand an organization by examining its edges and the ways in which it interacts with other elements of its environment. They encourage us to consider the edginess of the emerging postmodern era not simply as a restatement of the modern “age of anxiety” but rather as a sign of the rich potential that confronts us in our information-rich world. Postmodernists encourage us to identify differences that truly make a difference in our world. We must discard that which is superficially interesting but transitory and determine that which we individually and collectively should attend to at any point in time. Information that is solicited from the identification of differences becomes critical to any leader or manager in a postmodern organization.

Many organizational theorists of our time are coming to recognize the importance of detecting change and difference. It is often too late to respond when change and difference is very gradual or when it is noticed after considerable delay. Delay in the flow of information and slow response-time often leaves an organization in a vulnerable position. We have only to look at the American auto industry or, more broadly, the world’s ecology to appreciate the devastating effect of delayed recognition of a problematic change.

Interplay between Order and Chaos

In considering the organizational dimension of size and complexity, postmodernists often find themselves addressing a more basic issue concerning the interplay between order and chaos. Sometimes organizations seem to make sense. The policies and procedures look right (at least on paper) and things seem to be moving along in a predictable manner. At other times, everything seems to be fragmented and chaotic. Nothing makes any sense in the organization and one wonders if *the center can hold*. Postmodern theorists (especially those who are studying chaotic systems) suggest that these seemingly contradictory observations are actually a result of examining the organization at different levels.

Organizations (like virtually all other systems) contain layers of chaos and order. When confronted with a seemingly chaotic and unpredictable organization, we have only to move up one level (to greater abstraction), or down one level (to greater specificity), if we wish to find order. Thus, for instance, the behavior of a specific person may begin to make some sense once we begin to examine overall dynamics in her department rather than just look at her individual behavior. Organizational theorists tell us about the *deskilling* of managers or subordinates that often occurs in organizations and the ways in which this deskilling contributes in some manner to the maintenance of stability in this department.

Similarly, we can move up or down levels of analysis to find chaos in an organization that seems to be orderly. The operation of a ballet or theater company, for instance, may look very orderly from the audience's perspective. At a higher level, however, everything may look quite chaotic (inadequate funding, props that never arrive, recalcitrant performers)—just as at the level of the individual performer we will find stage fright, confusion, rivalry and other forms of non rational and chaotic behavior that are never seen by the appreciative audience. Similarly, in many large organizations, the customers (and perhaps even corporate board members) are never allowed to witness its pervasive chaos. We polish and rationalize (*public relations*) decisions that have been made in highly irrational ways and in complex, unpredictable settings.

Organizational Anchors and Forms

Postmodernists also have something to teach us about the mission and boundaries of the organizations in which we find ourselves. They employ rich and provocative metaphors to describe the distinctive ways in which organizations operation. Postmodernists, for instance, point to the need for anchors that provide both stability and flexibility to organizations as they negotiate with an unpredictable and turbulent external environment. These anchors exist at both the individual level (often called *career anchors*) and at the organizational level (often called *organizational charters*).

The postmodernists also speak of the differences between more traditional organizations that resemble maple trees (with deeply rooted identities and highly complex and differentiated structures), and some of the newer organizations that more closely resemble palm trees (with highly flexible and replicable structures but shallow root systems and short lives). The maple tree organization grows and changes very slowly, for each growth phase or change on the part of one branch on the tree ultimately requires a

readjustment of all the other branches of the tree. By contrast, change in the palm tree organization is readily introduced, for each unit of the organization operates independently and need not adjust appreciably to changes in other parts of the organization. Both types of organizations make sense in the postmodern world. One must decide, however, which is appropriate to one's own organization, or risk organizational dysfunction and death.

Spiritual Leadership

The third postmodern topic to be considered is the spiritual aspects of leadership. Leaders of the postmodern world must navigate a treacherous white water environment, which is filled with unpredictability and the need for short-term survival tactics, as well as long-term strategies based on broad visions and deeply embedded values. Leaders must be sources of integration in post-modern organizations. They serve in this integrative role primarily through the creation and sustenance of community and through serving in the role of servant to those with whom they work.

The notions of community and servanthood, in turn, lead us away from the traditional (both premodern and modern) notions of a society based on dominance, to a society based on partnership and collaboration. These styles of leadership have often been more commonly found among women than among men. The sacred model of leadership calls into question much of the traditional managerial training of leaders and many of the motives that guide men and women to seek positions of leadership in our society.

Organizational Bifurcation and Groping

The fourth theme to be addressed concerns two processes associated with institutional change: bifurcation and groping. These processes share a common emphasis on the systemic, yet often unpredictable, nature of any change process (the layering of chaos and order about which we have already written). The process of groping or bifurcation (splitting) focuses on the role played by specific, critical events (often called *rogue events*) or by shifts in the status of an established component of an organization (often described as *self-organizing criticality*).

Relatively minor change (at the right time and the right place) has a profound impact on the long-term trajectory of the organization. These minor changes can be tipping points for major organizational and societal transformations.¹ There is unpredictability in the case of any form of planned change—especially

when the change involves a transformational shift in the level at which a problem is being addressed or in the basic operating patterns of an organization. These transforming (*second-order*) changes are increasingly common in our postmodern world and require new modes of problem solving and learning.

Organizations as Relationships and Conversations

Conversation is the fifth organizational perspective to be considered in a unique and provocative manner by various postmodern theorists. The flow of energy or material resources is dominant in most material systems. By contrast, human systems (and organizations in particular) rely on the flow of information which, in turn, is embedded in a complex network of relationships and conversations. Some postmodernists (especially those who identify themselves as “de-constructionists”) consider organizations to be nothing more than a web of relationships and conversations. Even the structures and products of an organization are secondary in most contemporary organizations to the conversations that occur regarding these structures and products.

Stated in somewhat different terms, most people, resources and attention in present-day organizations are devoted not to the direct production of goods or direct provision of services, but to the use of verbal and written modes of communication about these goods and services. These extended conversations are required if large and complex organizations are to be held together. The center will hold in major organizations only when a significant proportion of the resources of the organization are devoted to integrative, indirect services (such as quality control, coordination, cost monitoring, planning and record keeping) rather than direct services (such as production, sales and repair). Except in small organizations, most of the time is spent by members of organizations in communicating with other people in the organization or outside the organization. We must rethink the ways in which we lead and influence the direction of these information-based entities if our organizations are nothing more (and nothing less) than extended conversations.

Storytelling and narrative are central to the postmodern condition. Stories are the lifeblood and source of system maintenance in organizations. The construction of stories about organizational successes and failures is key to the processes of personal and organizational transformation, much as the role played by remnants and enemies is central to the preservation of continuity and openness in the turbulent postmodern

environment. We must find ways in which storytellers, remnants of a former era and even our enemies can become honored participants in organizational improvement efforts.

Covenant and Culture

The final postmodern topic concerns the establishment of commitment and reflection within organizations. Building on the concepts of organizational conversations, rogue events and transformations, and leaders as spiritual guides, this postmodern perspective on work and its value emphasizes the role of reflection in the improvement of individual or collective enterprise. While organizational transformation often seems thunderous, individual men and women walk silently into the world of personal transformation. Postmodern conditions usually require small steps toward renewal rather than elaborate plans. These conditions also require a shift to different levels of understanding and new modes of learning.

In the modern world, boundaries (and identities defined by roles and rules) served as *containers* of anxiety. In the postmodern world, we must look to an inner sense of self and to an outer structure of support and community for shelter, stability and insight in an edgy and turbulent world. At the heart of this process is a search for sanctuary. Sanctuaries may be found in physical locations (a retreat or mountain cabin), within one's local surroundings ("a room of one's own") or within one's self (a moment for reflection). Regardless of its location, a sanctuary involves the creation and maintenance of temporary settings in which people can reflect on and planning for second order changes, try out small first order changes, and experience supportive and renewing community.

Concluding Comments

Within the postmodern world, we must find commitment within the context of faith and doubt. We must discover ways in which we make commitments and take action, while keeping a relativistic stance in a world that no longer allows for a stable ground of reference. We must often look to that which is old and that with which we disagree to find the balance and the kernel of truth that we need to navigate successfully in our turbulent and confusing postmodern world. We return to the wisdom found in virtually all premodern cultures concerning the facade of progress and the ephemeral nature of planning. While standing on the edge of a postmodern world, we must discover wisdom in the patience and persistence of premodern man. We must return to premodern perspectives regarding the sacred nature of human organizations and once

again listen to enlightening stories regarding our own human history and destiny. Only in this way can we successfully tend the complex and irreversible fires of the postmodern world.

ⁱ Malcolm Gladwell. *The Tipping Point*. Boston: Little, Brown, 2000.