



World Business Academy

Rekindling the Human Spirit in Business

VIEWPOINT

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Editor's note: Harrison Owen offers this piece as a follow-up to the piece that Academy President Rinaldo Brutoco wrote, "The Wisdom of Two Generals." Harrison draws on the many lessons he has learned from Open Space Technology and applies them to the circumstances we find ourselves in after the September 11 attacks. He writes of the phenomenon of transformation and provides some specific examples of actions we might take.

A Transformative Moment ...Now

By Academy Fellow Harrison Owen

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Author's Note: This article was written initially for the global community of people who use Open Space Technology. If Open Space is not part of your experience, it may be helpful to know that this simple approach enables groups, large and small, to navigate hugely conflicted and complex issues with virtually no advance preparation and surprisingly powerful and positive results. It has been used all over the world in thousands of instances for the past 15 years. Perceived by some as counter-intuitive or impossible, I think it is actually an interesting example of self-organizing systems at work. For further information: http://www.openspaceworld.com/brief_history.htm

Please note – this is not a commercial. You cannot buy Open Space Technology. It is free, and has always been.

I have spent my professional lifetime watching, thinking and writing about the transformation of human consciousness. I am not at all sure that I have made any original contributions, and for sure there exists an abundance of heavy thinkers in the area who have added greatly to whatever it is that I think I know. Be all that as it may, beginning in the early 80's, I and a small group of friends enunciated the notion of Organization Transformation, in which we attempted to apply the insights of individual transformation to our collective manifestations in groups – organizations. The full story is a long one¹, but certain observations have taken shape in my mind and informed my practice. I share them, not because I think they are right, but in the hope that collectively we may take the conversation deeper.

First: *Transformation is not something we do to ourselves or others – as in, I am going to transform that organization.* Rather transformation is something initiated at a point in time when changed environmental circumstances render our old way of being non-operative, and simultaneously opens the doorway to a new way of being (consciousness). And environment, for human beings, comes in a number of packages in addition to the physical, such as electronic, print, business, community etc.

Second: *Transformation (individually and collectively) is no walk in the park.* The open door chaotically ushers in terrible winds of discontinuity and change, feelings of loss, loneliness, nostalgia and, ultimately, despair. Fortunately, we as a species seemingly have "hardwired" into our constitution an effective process for dealing with all this called Griefwork – which does work, but not by eliminating all the pain and anxiety. Transformation under anesthesia is not a possibility. We have to go through the pain – not around it.

¹ For the details, please see my book *The Power of Spirit: How Organizations Transform*, Berrett-Koehler, 2000.

Third: *Transformation is something best done together, even though we all have to take the trip alone.* Something like holding hands when we cross the street. This is more than whistling as we pass by the cemetery. We have the opportunity, and I think obligation, to be with our fellows. "Being with" is not to be confused with creating new programs, espousing new fixes – although God knows some new programs and fixes could be helpful. Rather, I think it is about standing in the center of the circling storm, totally present and absolutely invisible – creating and holding the space/time in which grief can be worked, life renewed and consciousness changed. I believe we know something about all of that.

Fourth: *There are no guarantees, and certainly no guarantee that the outcome will be as we might have hoped.* Evolution sometimes proceeds by devolution. Occasionally we have to take several steps backwards in order to achieve a leap forward. And even if the movement is forward, the outcome is totally unpredictable. Be prepared to be surprised. This present moment could be the end of the ride, and doubtless a number of folks will choose to get off the bus. But if our history to date is any indicator, what lies ahead of us will simply boggle our minds with possibilities. Good ones, albeit with a shadow side.

So Now What?

As the bombs fall in Afghanistan, packets of anthrax wander America, and major portions of the Islamic world are inflamed by the passion of Jihad – now what? For me, the first part of an answer comes with a recognition: It's over. Not everything, of course – but the dream-like reality we have lived in the charmed land of America is over. As an American citizen, I am proud of the many good things we have done and been – the products we created, the technologies we invented, the degree of freedom and openness we have created for ourselves, and our willingness to share all that with the world. But as a global citizen, I am also profoundly aware of the abject poverty and hopelessness which afflicts the vast majority of people on this planet. I am painfully aware of the massive (physical) environmental pollution to which we have been a major contributor. Obviously, we as a people did not create all the ills of the planet, but I think it fair to state that we have not exercised sufficient effort towards their resolution. To whom much has been given, much shall be expected. We have been truly blessed - it is now time that we fully share our blessings. For those who see the present moment in terms of preserving The American Way of Life and Getting Back to Normal – and I know I have such feelings – the word is pretty clear. Forget it. Should we succeed in the short term – the next time the tectonic plates of our global consciousness shift – it will be a biggie. It's Over.

And Then?

Any person or group who thinks they have *The Plan for Resolution of Planetary Ills* is clearly deluded and possibly mad. The events and passions that swirl about us are simply too complex, interrelated and chaotic for comprehension, let alone rational planning, though Lord knows many will try. The effort itself is probably worthwhile, but for reasons rather different than the "planners" might have intended. At best these "planners and plans" form critical parts of the emerging global conversation out of which a new consciousness of what it means to be human may emerge. The paramount danger of the moment is not the renewal of terrorist attacks and bloody responses, it is rather that the space for global conversation will close. Some may feel that there is also a danger that we may talk it to death, but I think this is one time where there simply cannot be too much talk.

A series of stories appearing in The Washington Post make the point, I think. On Sunday (10/15/01) we had a story about that marvelous electronic miracle, the Command and Control Center at the FBI, proclaiming that our efforts must be "controlled from Washington." Good Luck, Charlie. Then this morning we had three headlines on the Front Page. "Anti-US Sentiment Spreading In Pakistan," "US Message Lost Overseas." and finally "Bush Rejects Taliban Offer on Bin Laden." Except for the fact that I am a citizen of the U.S. and a resident of Planet Earth, I felt a semblance of a chuckle coming from some strange place in me. I guess if you totally lose your sense of humor, the alternative might be madness.

So What To Do?

I don't know what you should do – except to keep the space open, in whatever way is humanly possible. For myself, there are a few specifics. For example:

Keep the electronic space open. I have an electronic colleague in India. His name is Mirza Yawar Baig, leadtrain@hotmail.com. He is Muslim and has taken it upon himself to share thoughts that appear in the world press with his western colleagues. Not all of it is pleasant reading, but he opens a window on a world than many of us never see. Best of all, he will answer if you email him. Or at least he "talks" to me.

Help others to Open Space – In January, God willing and the creeks don't rise – I am going to Israel to do a training program with Tova Averbuch. Outside of a certain hesitation that I feel (surprise) about jumping on any international flight at the present, I confess to other, deeper hesitations, primary of which is a genuine dis-ease with current Israeli policy towards the Palestinians. Tova and I have talked about this and she still wants me to come, and I want to go. And she has promised to make her best effort to insure that our participants are not just Israeli. Given the present circumstances, I am not sure how successful she will be, but that is the intention.

Seize the moment and invite a new consciousness to show up. This sounds pretty grandiose, and I guess it is. I also think it is possible. Of course it presumes that we might actually recognize this New Consciousness if we ran into it – but I think we have some definite clues. Characteristics include: High Learning, High Play, Appropriate Structures and Controls, and Genuine Community, all of which, of course, put in regular appearances in Open Space. It is critical to remember, however, that this is not a matter of the magic of Open Space, but rather the pre-existing reality of any well-functioning, self-organizing system. In Open Space we simply come face to face with what we already are. What makes all this different (or at least can make this different) is the conscious awareness and acceptance of our own reality as a self-organizing system. The consequences of this awareness/acceptance include an understanding that we are not in charge of the universe. Further, that our continued existence (in all senses of that word) depends upon a positive, effective, open and symbiotic relationship with our environment at all levels. Should we choose differently, as in closure, control and disrespect, we will cease (lose, fail, go kaput) because the open, living, self-organizing system that we are will stop. So what can we do? Simple. Open some Space and invite people to be fully what they are – with respect.

Should we then think that self-organization is but some other words for Nirvana and the Kingdom of God? Definitely not, as I think we are painfully discovering with al-Qaeda. It has been pointed out that al-Qaeda is, in many regards, the perfect example of a well-functioning, self-organizing system – The New Paradigm Organization. Flat, decentralized, value-driven, agile to a fault – and very effective. To what extent bin Laden and company are conscious of this, I haven't a clue, but that they are currently manifesting all the "Right Stuff" is pretty much beyond dispute, I think. Which makes the point that the power of self-organization, like all natural powers, is essentially value neutral. The power of gravity keeps us from floating off into space. That same power also allows bombs to fall.

I think we know some other things about self-organizing systems which may tell us a lot about the adequacy of current US policy and response. *Self-organizing systems under attack actually increase their effectiveness so long as they are basically in harmony with their environment – and can continue to draw support and nutrients.* At the moment al-Qaeda is like a fish in its own sea – a sea of the dispossessed who happen to be Islamic. It is theoretically possible to surgically remove the offending organism – but highly unlikely. And even if successful in this particular instance, it is predictable that the same environmental conditions which gave rise to the organism al-Qaeda will do so again. Only next time the life form will be more effective, efficient and virulent. Ultimately, the only effective strategy is to change the environment in more positive and healthy directions. I might also point out that the net effect of the current US/Western efforts, which isolate that environment, is to protect it from change. I shudder at the prospects of the long term implications of what is now being called The Bush Doctrine (Washington Post 10/16/01) – "If you aren't with us, you are against us."

The alternatives? Open the space – and keep opening the space – wherever and however that can be done. We have learned, I think, that conflict, in and of itself, is not bad. Indeed conflict has positive attributes – it shows that people care, they have passion. However, when the space is constricted, passions conflict. All attempts to dampen the passion or force it into preconceived structures which are socially acceptable to one group according to their agenda eventually fail or, at best, are counter-productive. Fifteen years in Open Space has taught us this – if nothing else. It would be wonderful, of course, if some wise great soul could effectively design *The New World Order* and all 6 billion of us could fit in comfortably. Lots of luck, Charlie. Now, if ever, we are forced back on the deep wisdom of the people – all the people – in the faith that the species, like all species will seek to optimize itself – otherwise known as creating a better life. Perhaps there were times when one group could decimate all others, and thereby create its own environment. Those times are gone, if they ever existed. We are all in this together. We will get through it together or not at all. For sure it will be quite a ride. And as we ride, it may be good to remember –

- Whoever comes are the right people² -- and that has to be all of us.
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have – even (or especially) if it doesn't turn out to our specifications.
- Whenever it starts is the right time – and now seems to be the time.
- When it's over, it's over. One way or another.

And so I am talking to Mirza, going to Israel, and opening space wherever and however I can.

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² These are The Four Principles that describe life in an Open Space gathering.