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VIEWPOINT

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Building the Bridge As You Walk On It

By Prof. Robert E. Quinn

(Editor's Note: Academy Fellow [Robert E. Quinn](#), Tracey Collegiate Professor in Business Administration & Professor of Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management at the University of Michigan, has just published [Building the Bridge As You Walk On It: A Guide for Leading Change](#) (Jossey-Bass). He is particularly interested in issues concerning leadership, vision and change and approaches these with a singularly positive perspective. He has an applied orientation and has 25 years of experience in working with executives on issues of organizational change. He has been involved in the design and execution of numerous large-scale change projects and has worked with a large percentage of the Fortune 500 companies.

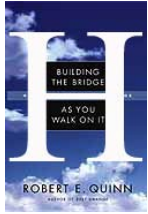
The new book “shows how anyone can enter the fundamental state of leadership by engaging in the eight practices that center on the theme of ever-increasing integrity--reflective action, authentic engagement, appreciative inquiry, grounded vision, adaptive confidence, detached interdependence, responsible freedom, and tough love”. After each chapter, he challenges readers to assess themselves with respect to each practice and to formulate a strategy for personal growth.

The book represents the next major extension in Prof. Quinn's odyssey into organizational effectiveness and the role of leadership. One of his career's major contributions has been the development of the Competing Values Framework that brilliantly synthesized the four dominant general models (human relations, open systems, rational goal, and internal process) into a single, coherent adaptable model. The CVF model attempts to reconcile means and ends in the definition and attainment of organizational effectiveness. The new book, in a sense, cuts the Gordian knot of the means/ends dilemma by offering managers a pragmatic approach to exercising leadership naturally, regardless of the context. Like the CVF model, it has the potential to be a milestone contribution to the crowded field of management advice.

He has kindly permitted the Academy to reprint the first chapter of [Building the Bridge](#).



“I decided to acknowledge my fears and close off my exits. Suddenly, my workplace became a place filled with people doing their best to either avoid deeper dilemmas or face them and grow. The previous importance of titles and roles began to melt away before my eyes. . . . My own change of perspective led me to see a new organization without having changed anyone but myself.”—JEREMY FISH



How do we create extraordinarily positive organizations?

This is the central question that integrates the research of my colleagues at the [Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship](#). The organizations we study tend to excel in two areas. They do very well at accomplishing their central, instrumental task, like making quality products, educating people, or providing health care. And they also excel in a second domain. The people who work in them tend to flourish. They are deeply connected to the objective, and they are deeply committed to one another. As a result, the organization can do things that other organizations cannot do.

I usually refer to such organizations as *productive communities*. They are not only highly productive but highly nurturing places. They are places where people live by the highest of human values, extending themselves for the instrumental purpose and for one another. Recently my colleagues and I visited such an organization. We went with the director of nursing at a large hospital to visit one of her outstanding units. As always happens when we visit these kinds of settings, we were inspired by deeply committed human beings performing well beyond normal expectations.

We asked some questions about their culture of success, and they spent a half-hour describing the innovative practices that had developed in the units. These practices were unique and very impressive. It would have been tempting to believe that they were the explanation. Eventually the director of nursing shook her head. She said, “Don’t be fooled by these practices. They are important, but they are a consequence, not the cause.”

The other people in the room nodded. They all knew what she was talking about. One of them began to speak of the woman who had run this wonderful unit for over a decade. They spoke of her in reverent tones. We posed probing questions, asking them to describe specific incidents. Some of the respondents spoke in tears as they shared the ways this woman had changed their organization and their lives.

Afterward the director told us that of her sixty managers, she has five or six like the woman we just heard about. No matter where she assigns them, they build units that achieve extraordinary performance. One of my colleagues asked, “What do they do?” There was a long silence. Finally the director said, “That is the wrong question. It is not what they do, because each one of them is unique in how they pull it off. It is not about what they do; it is about who they are.”

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In that last sentence is a key to positive organizing and productive community. Management and leadership books are naturally preoccupied with the search for behaviors, tools, techniques, and practices that can be exported and imitated elsewhere. It may be that they are telling us about the wrong thing. Organizational excellence tends not to be a function of imitation. It tends to be a function of origination.

It begins with one person—the one in ten who has the capacity to create productive community. In this hospital, five or six out of sixty supervisors fit this category. If we examine one hundred plant managers or one thousand CEOs, we tend to find the same pattern. The majority are normal. And a few are extraordinary in that they know how to enter a creative personal state that gives rise to a creative collective state. I call that

personal state the *fundamental state of leadership*. The collective state is productive community, which emerges as someone in the fundamental state of leadership attracts others into the process I refer to as “building the bridge as you walk on it.”

THE ORIGINS OF THIS BOOK

As I noted in the introduction to Part One, this book originated in the messages I received from readers of my book *Deep Change*. The people who wrote to me usually told me how they had used the book’s concepts to navigate a personal crisis or lead the transformation of their organization. Later, I contacted them and asked them to write a full account of what had happened. They shared cases ranging from very personal transformations to the transformation of major organizations. As I read those cases, I began to have new insights about the process of deep change. Eventually I began to formulate a new concept: the fundamental state of leadership.

In this book, you will meet some of these people. You will discover what the fundamental state of leadership is and what practices are likely to help you enter it. As preparation and background, let’s do a quick review of the notion of deep change.

THE BACKGROUND

An anchor on a ship is a device attached by a rope or cable that is cast overboard. The anchor digs into the bottom and holds the ship in place. The anchor is thus a useful tool that keeps the ship from aimless drifting.

In a dynamic world, the tools that we usually see as assets can turn into liabilities. I remember, for example, watching a movie about a ship caught in a sudden storm. As the storm grew in ferocity, the sailors realized that they had to cut away the anchor. They chopped madly at the rope so they could avoid being swamped. Their only hope was to ride out the storm on the tumultuous sea. They needed to be free from what was normally a useful source of stability. Their lives depended on it.

Over time, it is natural for both individuals and for organizations to develop anchors. Individuals, for example, develop a system of beliefs about how they can best cope in a world of scarce resources. This system becomes a personal identity. We sometimes refer to this anchor as an ego. Organizations also develop systems of belief about identity and coping. We refer to this anchor as the organizational culture. The individual ego and the organizational culture are normally valuable sources of stability.

Yet like ships, individuals and organizations are often confronted by storms. As individuals, we may need to cope with physical illness, the death of a loved one, divorce, abusive treatment, burnout, job loss, or other life demands. In organizations, we may need to cope with recession, new competitors, regulatory changes, evolving customer preferences, and many other such challenges.

These storms are usually preceded by dark clouds and other signals of danger. While the signals often call for a transformation, or what I call deep change, we tend to resist. When our old habits of thought and action seem to be ever less effective in the face of the change, we are slow to abandon them in favor of learning our way into a transformed state. To cut away our anchors and move forward into the storm of real-time learning is no easy decision.

In fact, rather than accepting the need for deep change, most of us practice denial. We rationalize away the signals that call us to courage and growth. We work very hard to preserve our current ego or culture. To give them up is to give up control. Normally we work hard to avoid the surrender of control. Instead, we strive to

stay in our zone of comfort and control. Given the choice between deep change or slow death, we tend to choose slow death.

Yet nature tends to have its way with us. The path to slow death still ends at death. For individuals, it can be the death of the ego or the body. For corporations, it can be the death of a particular set of assets or the overall enterprise. As we progress down the path of denial, our agony grows. The growing pain tends to force us to do what we do not want to do. We make deep change.

When we make deep change, we enter the fundamental state of leadership. This central concept will be developed and defined over the next several chapters. Here we meet some people who have learned to make deep change. Their stories provide a first look at what it means to enter the fundamental state of leadership. From these stories, we can also specify the objectives of this book.

OBJECTIVE ONE: HELPING PEOPLE WHO ARE ASSIGNED TO LEAD CHANGE

Jeremy Fish is a physician and an executive who was in charge of a transformation at a regional medical center in California. He found this task most challenging. In fact, he describes his feelings as the “emotions of a patient facing cancer.” As he moved forward in the transformational process, he felt a combination of fear, hope, and dread.

Most managers charged with leading a transformation have such feelings. As they move forward, they become increasingly aware of the political dangers. They begin to feel more and more insecure. While trying to convey confidence, they find themselves contemplating escape strategies that will minimize the political damage to their careers.

As they do this, they deny that they are doing it. Integrity decays, and insecurity grows. While verbally they continue to call for the commitment of others, they implicitly, but clearly, communicate their hypocrisy. In response, people espouse commitment while actually withholding commitment. Frustration, distrust, and conflict expand.

The leader becomes even more insecure and intensifies the effort, which makes everything worse. The vicious cycle then continues to expand, sucking the leader and the project into the vortex of failure, the very thing the leader feared in the first place.

Jeremy reports reading *Deep Change* and how he came to recognize his self-deception. In his words, “My fear of being fired, ridiculed, or marginalized at work was impairing my ability to lead. I also saw how my ‘exit strategy’ of leaving if things got uncomfortable rather than face my fears and discomfort was impairing my ability to commit fully to leadership.”

Jeremy was an executive, yet he was no different than most firstline employees. It is normal for all people in organizations, from the janitor to the CEO, to live in fear. It is normal for people in organizations to say one thing while believing another. This means that hypocrisy is normal. The recognition of his hypocrisy led Jeremy to make a decision that was not normal. Since the decision was exceptional, the results were exceptional as well. He reports:

I decided to acknowledge my fears and close off my exits. Suddenly, my workplace became a place filled with people doing their best to either avoid deeper dilemmas or face them and grow. The previous importance of titles and roles began to melt away before my eyes. Feared organizational figures became less menacing. . . . My own change of perspective led me to see a new organization without having changed anyone but myself. I brought my new perspective to my role.

Although Jeremy made a fundamental commitment, he still did not know exactly how to get where he wanted to go. In a transformation, we never do. Nor did it put him in control of the process of transformation.

During a transformation, we cannot be in control. So what good was the commitment? The commitment moved Jeremy to a new state, or way of being: the fundamental state of leadership. In this state, we see ourselves differently, more positively. We therefore see others differently, more positively. What were once constraining problems are suddenly seen as rich opportunities. When we enter the fundamental state of leadership, we tap new sources of power and, as the next case shows, attract others to join us on the transformational journey. In this illustration, we find the first objective of this book: to help people who are in charge of change efforts to enter the fundamental state of leadership. As we will see, when this happens, a unique set of behaviors, tools, and techniques will naturally arise to facilitate the emergence of a more productive community.

OBJECTIVE TWO: PROVIDING A NEW LANGUAGE FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE ALREADY ENGAGED IN TRANSFORMATION

Mike Alvis is a retired military officer who now works as a consultant. He spent much of his time with General Eric Shinseki, former chief of staff of the army. Shinseki's vision for the transformation of the army was one of the most ambitious undertakings of any chief of staff since General George Marshall. The vision called for a dramatic shift to a lighter and faster army.

The concept was simple, but the amount of change involved was staggering. Although Shinseki had a vision, he did not have a map telling him how to negotiate his way through all the required changes. No visionary ever does. When we commit to a vision to do something that has never been done before, there is no way to know how to get there. We simply have to build the bridge as we walk on it. I sometimes refer to this process as "walking naked into the land of uncertainty" or "learning how to walk through hell effectively."

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The early years of army transformation were very difficult. Shinseki did what he had to do. He pushed on, taking one step at a time. Shinseki's role became punishing. He experienced many dark nights of the soul. With each big, symbolic move, he came under intense criticism.

He was privately criticized by those on the inside and publicly attacked by the media. What was particularly remarkable about Shinseki is that he never displayed any ego needs. Unlike Jeremy, who was initially afraid of what might happen to him, Shinseki was fearless. He was not concerned about looking good. And although his critics questioned the wisdom of his every move, they never questioned his motive. It was clear that he was doing what he thought was best for the army. So he just kept doing what he thought was right, absorbed the pain, and pushed on.

Mike Alvis had an inside view of each move that Shinseki made. Watching the chief of staff had a major impact on Mike. His own level of commitment began to deepen. As this happened, Mike, like Jeremy, began to see his world differently and to relate to people in a new way.

He stopped seeing the resisters as "the enemy." He says, "I started to meet people where they were." And as he started to see them differently, he began to work with them differently. Mike shares another interesting point about the transformation of the army. Outsiders assume the army changes when a commander gives an order. As with all other organizations, when the army culture is threatened, people resist. In fact, it is often

the people at very high levels who become the invisible resisters. As result, an organizational transformation never follows a clean, top-down process. It is, instead, a social movement in which commitment spreads.

In this case, commitment spread from the chief of staff to people like Mike and then to larger and larger groups, including some of the people who were initially very resistant. Eventually the army transformation reached the point of “irreversible momentum.” The process was still unfolding when Shinseki finished his term of office in 2003. It will continue to unfold for decades into the future. While most people responsible for a transformation are like Jeremy Fish, a very few are like Eric Shinseki. They set aside their natural concern for their own self-preservation. They choose to put their own welfare second to the good of the vision. As they do so, they become increasingly passionate about the vision. Then they make a terrible discovery.

Since they are taking the organization where no one has been before, no one can know how to get there. No one has the necessary expertise. Furthermore, without the normal assumptions of equilibrium and expertise, the traditional principles of good management no longer work. Since there is no safe path, no way to be in control, they are forced to move forward one blind step at a time. They are forced to build the bridge as they walk on it. They then experience exponential learning about self, others, and the organization.

Yet when people ask such leaders to explain what is happening, they usually struggle. Like the exceptional people in the outstanding nursing units, they point to creative practices that have emerged. The leaders themselves struggle to explain what they have done. Because we lead transformation does not mean we can explain transformation. Normal models are not useful. The necessary language is not readily available. A second objective of this book therefore is to provide a new language, one that turns our attention not to behaviors and techniques but to who we are. It provides a language to talk about and change who we are.

OBJECTIVE THREE: HELPING INDIVIDUALS TO TRANSFORM THEMSELVES AND OTHERS

We often confuse leadership with position. Another of the lessons provided by those who have experienced deep change is that any of us has the power to transform the organizations and systems of which we are a part. Meet Roman Walley.

Roman Walley is a middle manager in a global oil company. He indicates that he has always had an inclination not to make waves. Roman then tells of experiencing some formidable trigger events in his life. They included the death of two loved ones. Afterward, he indicates, “I felt as if I was moving through life as a spectator. I was watching a play that I didn’t like, but I had no power to change the script.”

At this point, Roman was becoming attentive to signals that something needed to change, but he did not yet know what that something might be. Then he attended a workshop in which he was challenged to examine the principles of deep change and how he was living his life. He found himself wanting. He concluded that his life was too externally driven and that *he* had to change. In particular, he had always been reticent to ask hard questions of those in authority. Now he felt that for the good of the company, he had to begin doing exactly that. He says he determined to put “my integrity and self-respect first.” For the first time, he began to confront senior people on important corporate issues.

Instead of getting fired, as we might expect, Roman began to flourish. He says that senior managers began to see him in a new way. They began to invite him to consult on more complex, strategic issues. Roman goes on to describe a group of middle managers who were simply going through the motions on a key assignment. Roman boldly challenged the group, telling them they were acting like victims and that they had the choice to pursue a more creative path. Again there was a surprise: instead of rebelling, the people changed. Roman,

a man who had been afraid to make waves, seemed to gain power. This once passive middle level professional ended up leading deep change up, down, and across the system. He challenged people, and they responded. Roman was not a senior executive in charge of a transformational process. He was a middle-level professional whose influence stemmed from his own process of self-change.

Our usual ways of thinking and talking about leadership do not account for stories like those of Jeremy Fish, General Shinseki, Mike Alvis, and Roman Walley. Nor do they account for the stories of the other people we will meet in this book—people who leave behind normal ways of being and enter the fundamental state of leadership. No one remains in the fundamental state of leadership continuously, but it is possible to learn how to enter it more and more frequently. To do so requires a commitment to deep change and a willingness to embrace uncertainty—to build the bridge as we walk on it. Understanding that leadership is a temporary, dynamic state brings us to a radical redefinition of how we think about, enact, and develop leadership.

We come to discover that most of the time, most of us—including CEOs, presidents, and prime ministers—are not in the fundamental state of leadership. By the same token, we discover that any of us can be a leader who attracts others to join us in the process of deep change. We find that there are practices or disciplines that can help us enter the fundamental state of leadership more frequently. Finally, we discover that we must rethink how we develop leadership in ourselves and in others.

The rest of this book develops these themes. In the next chapter, we continue our journey by exploring more deeply what it means to say that leadership is a state.

PREPARATION FOR ENTERING THE FUNDAMENTAL STATE OF LEADERSHIP

Choose a quiet time when you can reflect on the meaning this chapter has for you. Strive to be as honest as you can.

Questions for Reflection

1. What did the director of nursing mean when she indicated that to understand the managers who tend to build productive communities, we must focus not on their behaviors and techniques but on who they are? What are the implications of this statement?
2. What are the positive and negative functions of the ego and the organizational culture? How do we normally deal with the negative functions?
3. Why is it natural for people and organizations to deny the signals for deep change? Think of an example, and indicate what you learned from it.
4. Why are individuals and organizations eventually driven to deep change? Think of an example, and indicate what you learned from it.
5. Do you agree that fear and hypocrisy are normal in organizations? Why might this be true? If it is true, what are the implications for change leaders?
6. In what form of hypocrisy was Jeremy Fish involved? What was the impact of that hypocrisy on the people he was leading?

7. After choosing to “close off his exits,” Jeremy reports some surprising consequences. How do you explain these consequences? Have you ever made a decision that altered how you saw the people and things around you? What happened?

8. What meaning do the following phrases have for you: “building the bridge as we walk on it,” “walking naked into the land of uncertainty,” and “learning how to walk through hell effectively”?

9. Why was it possible for Roman to successfully challenge his superiors? Why does this so seldom happen? Why do you think the middle managers responded to him?

Self-Improvement

1. Drawing on the stories you have read about people who either resist or embrace uncertainty and deep change, write a paragraph describing yourself as you are today.

2. Write a paragraph describing ways in which you would like to change in order to be someone who can lead transformation.

Sharing Insights If in responding to the questions above, you have an important insight or a meaningful story that you would like to share, visit www.deepchange.com and look for the links to submit stories for possible posting on the Deep Change Web site. You may thus help many people. If you would like to review such insights and stories, go to the same Web site.

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