

Planned Change: Partnering in the Age of Paradox

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Introduction

Let me tell you a secret—actually, it's a secret that we all know: Today and, I predict, in our many tomorrows, our lives will continue to be problem-free. How, you may ask, can I say that when now, more than ever, most of us are feeling almost overwhelmed with the increasingly rapid pace and number of crises we have to deal with in our work lives alone?

I can say our lives are problem-free because they are. What is keeping us up at night, lengthening our work hours and shortening our times of rest are not problems but dilemmas—paradoxes that, unlike problems, do not have right or wrong solutions. Rather, what's filling up all of our days are competing realities—not "black or white" issues, but "gray" challenges that we must address, challenges that most often do not lead to "yes" or "no" responses or solutions. Dilemmas, competing truths, must first be recognized and then "unpacked" and pulled apart, in order to, at best, be managed.

At some point we moved through the Age of Knowledge and Information Transfer to what Charles Handy (1994)

termed the Age of Paradox. Here in the 21st century, in our "flattened," highly connected world, we know, also, that the days of the Lone Ranger are gone; the most effective way to live fully—healthily and happily—is through partnerships. Technologically joined "friends" through Facebook, links, blogs and networks are here... and here to stay. So what is an organizational leader to do? Well, let's look at just three paradoxes for partnership:

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Let's jump right into the deep end and look at what usually holds us back or what gets in the way of trying something new—a new project, a new position or even just a new way to get into work. What gets in the way most of all is fear. Fear is powerful. It can push people together and it can pull them apart. In some instances, fear can rip apart an individual. Fear of loss of position, power and control has been the primary motivation behind many of the world's tragedies. In Hitler's regime and in other hate movements in our history and, sadly, to date, the "we must get rid of these people" mandate has many of its roots in the ground of fear from a greatly downturned economy.

Less tragically yet still sadly, fear of limited growth potential is one of the major reasons nowadays that people leave our organizations. In fact, in a recent survey

of several hundred organizations in our nonprofit social sector, salary was one of the least cited reasons; only about 2 percent of those interviewed said that their low salaries were the reason they left their positions (Opportunity Knocks 2010). And many of our talented colleagues do have choices.

In fact, 20 percent of our folks are voluntarily leaving their jobs after less than one year (National Human Services Assembly, personal communication), and they are taking with them their institutional knowledge and our time and training invested in them. Some of our talented colleagues are leaving to start their own businesses. Others leaving us are being scooped up by socially responsible corporations—for-profits that promise flexible workplaces that provide good work-family balance with opportunities to most quickly move up the hierarchical ladder.

Nowadays, some of our new and younger staff talent are being called “sector agnostics.” They share our desire to “give back,” but from *where* they do so is irrelevant to them (Cornelius et al. 2008).

But all is not lost! Actually, looking fully at the fear of those leaving us, we find possibilities to counter their fears. We know our talented people want more training. They want to continue to learn and develop and do so in organizations that recognize that *whole* people come to work. These people have families—children and parents—and, when they need our people, our people must be able to be with them, and do so without fear that their jobs will

be in danger. Our most talented colleagues want to work in organizations with powerful minds and compassionate hearts. And isn't that what all of our organizations in the social services once were like?

Somewhere we lost our way, our confidence in ourselves, and fear seeped in. Many of us now work in and even have unintentionally contributed to cultures filled with fear. Like icy cold water, this fear made us pull in and be less flexible, with more rigid policies and procedures. And to make it even worse, we began to falsely believe that there was no other way.

Yet again, once recognized for what it is, fear can be *fully* used and bring us together right here and now. Harnessing and directing the fear of loss of our organizations and their services can help us to find ways to most creatively co-labor—to collaborate by actively seeking out “kindred others” who may not even have been thought of before. This leads us directly to our second partnership paradox.

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These are times to be on the lookout for the familiar in those who may not immediately look like us. The

possibilities to ensure our organizations' survival, so that we can meet the ever-expanding needs of those we serve, go beyond us here in the nonprofit social service sector. Organizations that are committed to thriving are open to unions with any and all who share their fundamental purpose, their mission, their reason for being. Such not-for-profits may seek out program sharing with public governmental agencies or even decide to create spin-off ventures or consolidate resources with businesses in the for-profit sector. Across the continuum of options for our organizations to come together—from loosely connected affiliations through more tightly joined joint ventures and maybe all the way to legally defined mergers and acquisitions—agencies today have many possibilities that they can explore. All is possible now; we know how to do this. Our only limitation is our degree of imagination.

In years past, yet for most of us not really too long ago, the most thoughtful organizations' boards and staff actively engaged in strategic planning—a detailed analysis starting with your organization's history, present situation, mission, and assessment of upcoming critical issues both inside and within the environment. We then used this information to develop "the strategy" (such as growing in terms of services or staff numbers, specializing in terms of service focus, professionalizing the overall organization). That strategy development then led us to implementing the plan. Together this internal and external

scrutiny was intended to enable us to articulate the “strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats” within and outside of the agency. From all, a linear, step-wise “process for progress” was determined, a blueprint that was to last many years.

Just as we now know that for our 21st-century organizations we can only begin to think of planning three to five years out, we now also remember that there are no straight lines. This leads us to our final paradox.

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3. The “straightaways” to tomorrow are best traveled slowly and thoughtfully.

Yes, the yellow brick road we follow to get close to our goals is actually a crooked path. An analysis of what is, is helpful but that is just our starting point. Today is just that —today, this day. Snapshots of today and even yesterday are just moments in time. We must slowly and thoughtfully move from static strategic planning to continuous strategic thinking and strategic action, all the while sorting out what may be important to do from what is really “strategic”; from what will we get our most gain? What action will serve as leverage or even a facilitator of other actions critical to attaining our goal? We must do our best to constantly look around all of the corners as if we had

periscopes to try to see, envision, what may be coming.

And here's a clue. If we take a careful, honest look at all that brought us to this moment, we will see that even our own personal paths did not always or, for some of us, ever follow a logical, straight path. So why would we think that in these times of heightened complexity, uncertainty and ceaseless change, the evolution of our organizations would be any different?

To really provide the much-needed leadership for our organizations we must plan for change; we must go beyond thinking outside of the box to discernment and action *without* any boxes. While for some of us this perspective may be exciting, for many others it is downright scary. But we are not alone—remember, we're all in this together. And the more we gather to think most critically and creatively, to analyze and synthesize, the more we will be able to recognize, tease apart and then balance the competing tensions, the dilemmas that face us daily, with courage and compassion.

Together, courage—the ability to face fear, to have the stamina of will—and compassion call for the ability to act decisively while maintain a reverence for Life. This union of courage and compassion enables us to see problems as opportunities, hear complaints as different ideas, understand resistance as possibilities, and boldly recognize that most people in our organizations are doing the best they can with who they are and what they know.

Knowing that our yellow brick roads, our straightaways, are crooked and best traveled slowly and thoughtfully with those with whom we share a common cause are essential words of wisdom for forward movement.

In conclusion, recognizing just these three paradoxes of today allows us to attend to them most effectively, starting right here, right now, remembering that we can do this together.

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