

Sensing And Shaping Our Future:

A Co-Creative Approach To Innovation, Leadership And Change

By

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Introduction

You have faced tough questions and handled transitions. Like individuals, organizations also are living systems and they, at various points, reach complex crossroads too. But it is at these very junctures where opportunities lie. Conflicts and problems can become gateways for noticing how things happen, and once you understand how to establish co-creative partnerships with living systems, you can help influence what takes shape in the future.

For over 25 years, we have developed a growing community of practice¹ that, together, has created concepts and tools to actually increase our capacity for innovation, leadership and change. With these principles and practices, we can locate ourselves in virtually any situation; then we sense what is emerging, discern what is needed, and develop plans and actions that work. And we teach others how to do this too.

At the core, this approach involves paying close attention to what is beginning, maturing or ending in our own lives, and for every person, idea or organization we encounter. We respect what is already in progress, and we work with natural cycles and the system's own instincts for change. We assist individuals and organizations to uncover the essence or genius that underlies the distinctive way they generate value in the world. We help people learn how to draw on their inherent creativity and energy to discover and develop breakthroughs. We help them discover their own capacity for responding, leading, and problem solving. Together, we sense what's emerging and needed next. We use action learning, experimentation and practice to form sustainable responses to tough questions and high stakes transitions.

The Core Issue

You may unexpectedly have

come to a place where "tried and true" methods no longer work and they can't seem to be fixed. You realize that doing more of the same is futile, and you seem to have exhausted all the plausible options. You may recognize the opportunity for a breakthrough, but can't see past all the variables or competing interests that would need to be addressed. You may sense that the issues you face cannot be solved at the level of complexity at which you are currently operating. You may know what is not working, but you may not know what would work.

Perhaps you sense a bigger yet more challenging future ahead, but you can't quite see how to get there.

How *Not* To Address The Problem

To impose a preconceived solution on an individual or on an organization usually evokes resistance, and often simply doesn't work. This is especially true when

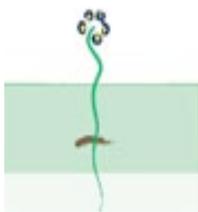
¹ This paper incorporates seminal work on Formative Theory by Stanley Keleman; and includes insightful contributions by Craig Fleck and Roger Harrison. This material is also the result of stimulating collaborations with Jude Blitz, Tom Callanan, Barbara Cecil, Tom Daly, Anne Doshier, Elizabeth Doty, Glenna Gerard, Rosie Kuhn, Michael Marlowe, John Ott, Maryliz Smith, Karen Speerstra and Penny Williamson. This work also reflects lessons learned with creative partners in client settings, too many to name individually in this space.

Additionally, this material is grounded in the findings of a research project that spanned three years and was sponsored by the John F. Fetzer Institute. I am deeply indebted to the courageous and generative partners in that research: Dr. William Ury, co-founder of the Global Project on Negotiation at Harvard University; the Internet Infrastructure Platform Unit at Hewlett-Packard; the Formative Assessments Division at CTB/McGraw-Hill; and the National League of Cities with the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

we encounter unknown terrain. In such cases, disparate voices may advocate conflicting expectations, solutions, and future scenarios, and there is no consensus about the way to proceed. Merely gathering diverse perspectives is inadequate, and worse, is likely to spread ignorance.

A Different Way Forward

However, once you learn to establish co-creative partnerships with the systems in which you live and work, you will begin to view individuals, groups, organizations and communities as having lives of their own. You will discover that each follows its own unique developmental path or life cycle. By enlisting system members in exploring what season that particular life cycle is in, you will learn how to focus



the diversity of perspectives and capabilities found within each emerging system. Change then occurs according to natural processes; and you apply skills and resources that correspond to its unique developmental challenges.

What Resources Can We Rely Upon?

Your natural abilities form a plentiful and dependable source of creativity and energy. At the deepest level, your signature way of being, is what makes you distinct, and is a solid foundation from which to invent new responses and “solutions”. In Figure 1, you will find an overview of four sets of

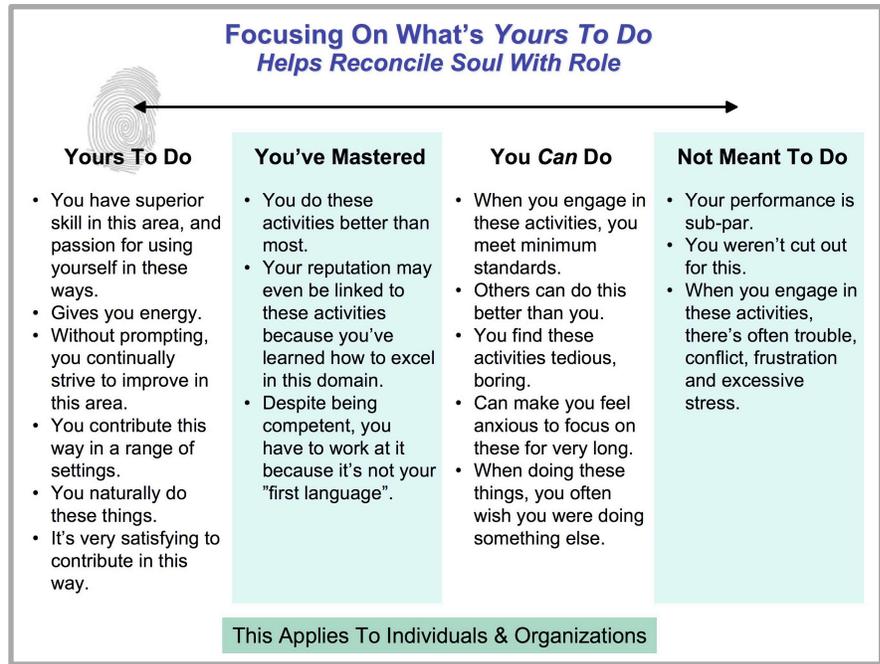


Figure 1

helpful ways to discover not only what is yours to do, but how to establish what you have already accomplished, how you might stretch, and, perhaps most importantly, what you are not meant to do.

Things invariably work better for you when your role corresponds with what's distinctively "yours" to do. It is also much easier to bring an innovation to life and into the world when it is congruent with your unique genius.

How Do We Discern What Is Important?

When, as a leader, you can receive conflict and chaos, and address the most crucial issues facing a group, others are much more likely to follow your lead. However, it can be extremely challenging to respond effectively when emotions run high, or when the complexity of the situation obscures what is happening. Sometimes, you may even

find your senses clouded or you may be “triggered” into a state that feels out-of-control or less-than desirable.

In order to think clearly, and to be of service, you must be fully present, and clearly sense what is going on; then you can formulate skillful responses while the window of opportunity is still open. Practices that tap into and focus your body's intelligence have been fully researched and can be learned. For instance, instead of trying to overcome a given reaction, you can explore reflexes for cues about what might be needed. In order to accurately interpret interpersonal and system dynamics, you can use methods that provide a “balcony view” of the system, enabling you to recognize powerful, yet invisible patterns and structures that underlie what happens on “the stage.” Empowered with a fresh perspective and the ability to alter your reactions, you can form effective responses whenever the need arises.

	Signature	Implementation
Key Individuals: 	Unique Gifts	Yours To Do Relationships Agreements
Groups & Organizations: 	Founding Genius	Offering and Organizational Architecture
Innovation: 	Breakthrough Insight	Product, Service or Experience Adoption Strategy
Background Influences & Culture: 	World View	Culture Theory & Practices

Figure 2 • Levels Of System & Types Of Issues

What Needs To Change? What Doesn't?

Catalysts for change come from “outside-in” influences (such as changes in market forces), and also from the “inside-out” (such as your intention to bring your roles into alignment with what’s “yours to do”). Changes in one part of a system activate needs for shifts elsewhere. Changes in the nature of products or services can create needs for shifts in the nature of leadership and organizational structure; changes in skills and roles as well.

Some issues can be resolved with technical or known solutions. Others pose challenges because the nature of the problem, opportunity or solution is still forming and emergent, and as a result, requires approaches that foster discovery when no one knows which way to proceed. And for those challenges that arise during implementation and execution—and they will—you will need a different set of methods, tools and skills.

In order to cope more master-

fully, you can listen for what is happening, or “trying to happen” in a person, an organization or larger social system. Provocative questions will emerge: Which aspects of the system need to change? What is ending, beginning, or seeking to deepen and mature? What is happening at one level of the system, that we must keep track of in order for evolution to occur across the entire ecosystem? (See Figure 2.)

How Can We Tell What's Needed?

Instead of searching for problems to fix, you will discover more useful information if you assess where a person or organization resides in its present life cycle. (See Figure 3 for an example.) Clues are given in current relationships, pat-

terns and structures typical of the system. As you explore impulses for change and growth that are congruent with the essence and genius of this system, you can better assess what is appropriate for the system’s next developmental stage. And in a way that includes the larger context or ecosystem, you can sense what is emerging and what is needed next.

How Do We Develop Responses That Work?

All natural principles of how life takes shape—how new forms appear, become functional, and eventually disintegrate—are fueled by the life force of the living system

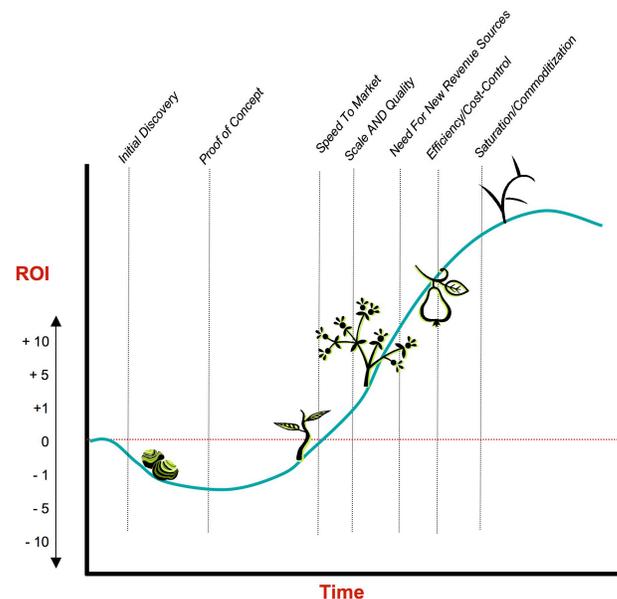


Figure 3 • Predictable Challenges In The Product Lifecycle

in question. This means we can work with what is already in progress, rather than impose a “solution” from outside.

It’s more effective to test or simulate ideas and plans first, before putting them into action. It is crucial to attend to and incorporate feedback from the person, the organization, or the larger environ-

ment. As a way to learn how to do this, we encourage system members to become a vital part of a simulation process, a "lab" for the deeper exploration and experimentation that it takes to do this well. In this safe "laboratory" space, individuals or groups, supported by others, can experiment with, and experience some of the consequences of different options for action before committing to a particular path forward.

How Does This Work As One Integral Process?

When viewed as a practice over time, this co-creative approach, "The Sensing and Shaping Process," (See Figure 4.) presents itself in a sequence of unfolding steps, with corresponding practices and indicators of progress. By working with the system's instinctive efforts to differentiate new behavior, whether it involves two or two hundred, this approach provides an elegant process for developing and experimenting with changes that will continue to emerge over time.

The process is not linear. Rather, like life itself, it unfolds within elemental and cyclical forces. This often requires counter-intuitive moves, such as in gardening, where pruning can lead to new growth. By involving system members in learning from direct experience, the intangible, yet ever-present forces of creativity and discernment always available whenever two or more are present, can manifest.

What's Ours To Do? It's Time to Shape The Future Together

Knowing how to locate yourself in any situation, and to discern how to serve, equips us to help with issues that will affect generations to come. It is time to recognize the profound influence of the deeply embedded world views and metaphors by which we live. For example, we have an "education myth." As a result, we design and expect our schools to work like factories. But neither children nor adults learn that way. We have a "healthcare myth." We seem to think health is a marketable commodity available from a pill or

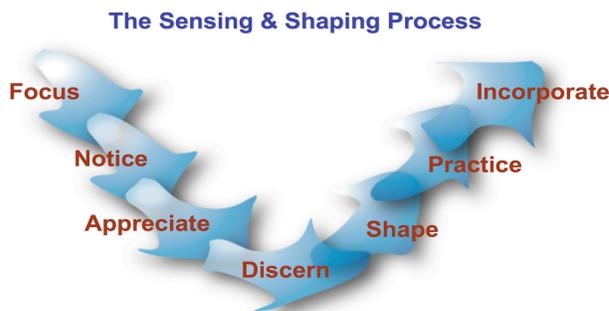


Figure 4

through a procedure. But bodies don't heal that way. Together, we can change these myths and co-create new stories.

When we apply our approach to societal issues, we hold up a mirror and ask which myths are dominant, and at what price? Which need to be preserved or deepened? Which must be replaced?

Where To From Here?

With only a beginner's grasp of these principles and related practices, you can bring tremendous

value to situations at home and at work. For example, it is relatively easy to discern what season a person, an innovation or team is moving through. This developmental perspective provides information about what might be unfolding and needed next. Similarly, an appreciation for the distinctive way an individual or an organization makes its way in the world reduces the chances of doing harm due to the imposition of an unsustainable ideal or "solution".

Learning to sense and shape the future is similar to learning a martial art. The ability to influence transformations in complex settings takes dedication and practice. Besides disciplined practice, you need skilled training partners, adequate practice space, and honest feedback concerning the results of your moves. You will benefit from practicing your new "martial arts skills" in a safe environment—a place where you can learn from experimentation and make mistakes in a community of support.

Together, we can sense and shape the future.

About The Author:

Mitch Saunders has a long history of guiding pioneering individuals and organizations through high-stakes transitions and transformations.

Formerly a researcher and teacher at the Organizational Learning Center at MIT, Mitch is the creator of The Agility Lab, a powerful social technology that enables people to quickly generate and test options associated with personal and organizational transformation. He can be reached at: mitch@resilientsystems.com.