Innovation Means Relying on Everyone's Creativity
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Innovation has always been a primary challenge of leadership. Today we live in an era of such rapid change and evolution that leaders must work constantly to develop the capacity for continuous change and frequent adaptation, while ensuring that identity and values remain constant. They must recognize people's innate capacity to adapt and create-to innovate.

In my own work I am always constantly and happily surprised by how impossible it is to extinguish the human spirit. People who had been given up for dead in their organizations, once conditions change and they feel welcomed back in, find new energy and become great innovators. My questions are, How do we acknowledge that everyone is a potential innovator? How can we evoke the innate human need to innovate?

The human capacity to invent and create is universal. Ours is a living world of continuous creation and infinite variation. Scientists keep discovering more species; there may be more than 50 million of them on earth, each of whom is the embodiment of an innovation that worked. Yet when we look at our own species, we frequently say we're "resistant to change." Could this possibly be true? Are we the only species-out of 50 million--that digs in its heels and resists? Or perhaps all those other creatures simply went to better training programs on "Innovation for Competitive Advantage."

Many years ago, Joel Barker popularized the notion of paradigms or worldviews, those beliefs and assumptions through which we see the world and explain its processes. He stated that when something is impossible to achieve with one view of the world, it can be surprisingly easy to accomplish with a new one. I have found this to be delightfully true. Now that I understand people and organizations as living systems, filled with the innovative dynamics characteristic of all life, many intractable problems have become solvable. Perhaps the most powerful example in my own work is how relatively easy it is to create successful organizational change if you start with the assumption that people, like all life, are creative and good at change. Once we stop treating organizations and people as machines, and stop trying to re-engineer them, once we move into the paradigm of living systems, organizational change is not a problem. Using this new worldview, it is possible to create organizations filled with people who are capable of adapting as needed, who are alert to changes in their environment, who are able to

innovate strategically. It is possible to work with the innovative potential that exists in all of us, and to engage that potential to solve meaningful problems.

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□□□We are gradually giving up the dominant paradigm of western culture and science for over 300 years-that of the world and humans as machines. Almost all approaches to management, organizational change, and human behavior have been based on mechanistic images. When we applied these mechanical images to us humans, we developed a strangely negative and unfamiliar view of ourselves. We viewed ourselves as passive, unemotional, fragmented, incapable of self-motivation, disinterested in meaningful questions or good work.

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□□□But the 21st century world of complex systems and turbulence is no place for disabling and dispiriting mechanistic thinking. We are confronted daily by events and outcomes that shock us and for which we have no answers. The complexity of modern systems cannot be understood by our old ways of separating problems, or scapegoating individuals, or rearranging the boxes on an org chart. In a complex system, it is impossible to find simple causes that explain our problems, or to know who to blame. A messy tangle of relationships has given rise to these unending crises. To understand this new world of continuous change and intimately connected systems, we need new ways of understanding. Fortunately, life and its living systems offer us great teachings on how to work with a world of continuous change and boundless creativity. And foremost among life's teachings is the recognition that humans possess the capabilities to deal with complexity and interconnection. Human creativity and commitment are our greatest resources.

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□□□For several years, I have been exploring the complexities of modern organizations through the lens of living systems. But rather than question whether organizations are living systems, I've become more confident about stating the following: the people working in the organization are alive, and they respond to the same needs and conditions as any other living system. I personally don't require any deeper level of clarity than this. But I'd also like to note that one of the gifts of understanding living systems is that it soon becomes evident that Life's processes apply both to individuals and systems. The dynamics of life are "scale-independent"-they are useful to explain what we see no matter how small or large the living system.

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□□□The new worldview of organizations as living systems rather than machines offers many principles for leadership. Each of these principles has affected my work in profound ways. Together they allow leaders to accomplish our greatest task -- to create the conditions where human ingenuity can flourish.

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□□□Meaning engages our creativity

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□□□Every change, every burst of creativity, begins with the identification of a problem or opportunity that somebody finds meaningful. As soon as people becomes interested in an issue, their creativity is instantly engaged. If we want people to be innovative, we must discover what is important to them, and we must engage them in meaningful issues. The simplest way to discover what's meaningful is to notice what people talk about and where they spend their energy.

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□□□In my own work with this principle, I've found that I can't learn this just by listening to managers' self-reports, or by taking the word of only a few people. I need to be working alongside a group or individual to learn who they are and what

attracts their attention. As we work together and deepen our relationship, I can then discern what issues and behaviors make them sit up and take notice. As we work together, doing real work, meaning always becomes visible. For example, in meetings, what topics generate the most energy, positive or negative? What issues do people keep returning to? What stories do they tell over and over? I can't be outside the process, observing behaviors or collecting data in traditional ways. I've also learned that I notice a great deal more if I am curious rather than certain.

In any group, I know that I will always hear multiple and diverging interpretations. Because I expect this, I now put ideas, proposals, and issues on the table as experiments to see what's meaningful to people rather than as recommendations for what should be meaningful to them. One of my favorite examples of how easily we can be surprised by what others find meaningful occurred among healthcare professionals who were trying to convince parents of young children to use seatbelts. But these parents were from a traditional, non-Western culture. They did not see the act of securing their child to a seat as protective of the child. They saw it as invoking the wrath of God. Strapping in a child was an invitation to God to cause a car accident.

I've learned how critical it is to stay open to the different reactions I get, rather than instantly categorizing people as resistors or allies. This is not easy--I have to constantly let go of my assumptions and stereotypes. But when I listen actively for diversity rather than agreement, it's fascinating to notice how many interpretations the different members of a group can give to the same event. I am both astonished and confident that no two people see the world exactly the same.

Depend on Diversity

Life relies on diversity to give it the possibility of adapting to changing conditions. If a system becomes too homogenous, it becomes vulnerable to environmental shifts. If one form is dominant, and that form no longer works in the new environment, the entire system is at risk. Where there is true diversity in an organization, innovative solutions are being created all the time, just because different people do things differently. When the environment changes and demands a new solution, we can count on the fact that somebody has already invented or is already practicing that new solution. Almost always, in a diverse organization, the solution the organization needs is already being practiced somewhere in that system. If, as leaders, we fail to encourage unique and diverse ways of doing things, we destroy the entire system's capacity to adapt. We need people experimenting with many different ways, just in case. And when the environment then demands a change, we need to look deep inside our organizations to find those solutions that have already been prepared for us by our colleagues.

There is another reason why diversity lies at the heart of an organization's ability to innovate and adapt. Our organizations and societies are now so complex, filled with so many intertwining and diverging interests, personalities, and issues, that nobody can confidently represent anybody else's point of view. Our markets and our organizations behave as "units of one." What this means is that nobody sees the world exactly the same as we do. No matter how hard we try to be understanding of differences, there is no possibility that we can adequately represent anybody else. But there is a simple solution to this dilemma. We can ask people for their unique perspective. We can invite them in to share the world as they see it. We can listen for the differences. And we can trust that together we can create a rich mosaic from all our unique perspectives.

Involve everybody who cares

Working with many kinds of organizations over the past several years, I've learned the hard way that building participation is not optional. As leaders, we have no choice but to figure out how to invite in everybody who is going to be affected by change. Those that we fail to invite into the creation process will surely and always show up as resistors and saboteurs. But I haven't become insistent on broad-based participation just to avoid resistance, or to get people to support my efforts. I've learned that I'm not smart enough to design anything for the whole system. None of us these days can know what will work inside the dense networks we call organizations. We can't see what's meaningful to people, or even understand how they get their work done. We have no option but to ask them into the design process.

I know from experience that most people are very intelligent-they have figured out how to make things work when it seemed impossible, they have invented ways to get around roadblocks and dumb policies, they have created their own networks to support them and help them learn. But rarely is this visible to the organization until and unless we invite people in to participate in solution-creation processes. The complexity and density of organizations require that we engage the whole system so we can harvest the invisible intelligence that exists throughout the organization.

Fortunately, during the past ten years there has been pioneering work (by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, Robert Jacobson, Kathy Dannemiller, and many others) on how to engage large numbers of people in designing innovations and changing themselves. Yet even in the presence of strong evidence for how well these processes work, most leaders till hesitate to venture down the participation path. Leaders have had so many bad experiences with participation that describing it as "not optional" seems like a death sentence. But we have to accept two simple truths: we can't force anybody to change. And no two people see the world the same way. We can only engage people in the change process from the beginning and see what's possible. If the issue is meaningful to them, they will become enthusiastic and bright advocates. If we want people's intelligence and support, we must welcome them as co-creators. People only support what they create.

Diversity is the path to unity

All change begins with a change in meaning. Yet we each see the world differently. Is it possible to develop a sense of shared meaning without denying our diversity? Are there ways that organizations can developed a shared sense of what's significant without forcing people to accept someone else's viewpoint?

There is a powerful paradox at work here. If we are willing to listen eagerly for diverse interpretations, we discover that our differing perceptions somehow originate from a unifying center. As we become aware of this unity in diversity, it changes our relationships for the better. We recognize that through our diversity we share a dream, or we share a sense of injustice. Then, magical things happen to our relationships. We open to each other as colleagues. Past hurts and negative histories get left behind. People step forward to work together. We don't hang back, we don't withdraw, we don't wait to be enticed. We actively seek each other out because the problem is important. The meaningfulness of the issue sounds louder than past grievances or difficulties. As we discover something whose importance we share, we want to work together, no matter our

differences.

I've been humbled to see how a group can come together as it recognizes its mutual interests. Working together becomes possible because they have discovered a shared meaning for the work that is strong enough to embrace them all. Held together in this rich center of meaning, people let go of many interpersonal difficulties, and work around traditional hindrances. They know they need each other. They are willing to struggle with relationships and figure out how to make them work because they realize this is the only path to achieving their aspirations.

People will always surprise us

Perhaps because of the study of human psychology, perhaps because we're just too busy to get to know each other, we have become a society that labels people in greater and greater detail. We know each other's personality types, leadership styles, syndromes, and neurotic behaviors. We are quick to assign people to a typology and then dismiss them, as if we really knew who they were. If we're trying to get something done in our organization, and things start going badly, we hunt for scapegoats to explain why it's not working. We notice only those who impede our good plans--all those "resistors," those stubborn and scared colleagues who cling to the past. We label ourselves also, but more generously, as "early adopters" or "cultural creatives."

I was recently given a T-shirt with a wonderful motto on the back: "You can't hate someone whose story you know." But these days, in our crazed haste, we don't have time to get to know each others' stories, to be curious about who a person is, or why she or he is behaving a particular way. Listening to colleagues-their diverse interpretations, their stories, what they find meaningful in their work -- always transforms our relationships. The act of listening to each other always brings us closer. We may not like them or approve of their behavior, but if we listen, we move past the labels. Our "enemy" category shrinks in population. We notice another human being who has a reason for certain actions, who is trying to make some small contribution to our organization or community. The stereotypes that have divided us melt away and we discover that we want to work together. We realize that only by joining together will we be able to create the change we both want to see in the world.

Rely on Human Goodness

I know that the only path to creating more innovative workplaces and communities is to depend on one another. We cannot cope, much less create, in this increasingly fast and turbulent world without each other. If we try and do it alone, we will fail.

There is no substitute for human creativity, human caring, human will. We can be incredibly resourceful, imaginative, and open-hearted. We can do the impossible, learn and change quickly, and extend instant compassion to those who are suffering. And we use these creative and compassionate behaviors frequently. If you look at your daily life, how often do you figure out an answer to a problem, or find a slightly better way of doing something, or extend yourself to someone in need? Very few people go through their days as robots, doing only repetitive tasks, never noticing that anybody else is nearby. Take a moment to look around at your colleagues and neighbors, and you'll see the same behaviors --people trying to be useful, trying to make some small contribution, trying to help someone else.

We have forgotten what we're capable of, and we let our worst natures rise to the surface. We got into this sorry state partly because, for too long, we've been treating people as machines. We've force people into tiny boxes, called roles and job descriptions. We've told people what to do and how they should behave. We've told them they weren't creative, couldn't contribute, couldn't think.

　　　After so many years of being bossed around, of working within confining roles, of unending reorganization, reengineering, down-sizing, mergers and power plays, most people are exhausted, cynical, and focused only on self-protection. Who wouldn't be? But it's important to remember that we created these negative and demoralized people. We created them by discounting and denying our best human capacities.

　　　But people are still willing to come back; they still want to work side by side with us to find solutions, develop innovations, make a difference in the world. We just need to invite them back. We do this by using simple processes that bring us together to talk to one another, listen to one another's stories, reflect together on what we're learning as we do our work. We do this by developing relationships of trust, where we do what we say, where we speak truthfully, where we refuse to act from petty self-interest. These processes and relationships have already been developed by many courageous companies, leaders, and facilitators. Many pioneers have created processes and organizations that depend on human capacity and know how to evoke our very best.

　　　In my experience, people everywhere want to work together, because daily they are overwhelmed by problems that they can't solve alone. People want to help. People want to contribute. Everyone wants to feel creative and hopeful again.

　　　As leaders, as neighbors, as colleagues, it is time to turn to one another, to engage in the intentional search for human goodness. In our meetings and deliberations, we can reach out and invite in those we have excluded. We can recognize that no one person or leader has the answer, that we need everybody's creativity to find our way through this strange new world. We can act from the certainty that most people want to care about others, and invite them to step forward with their compassion. We can realize that "You can't hate someone whose story you know."

　　　We are our only hope for creating a future worth working for. We can't go it alone, we can't get there without each other, and we can't create it without relying anew on our fundamental and precious human goodness.