Generativity in Organizational Life

By Mary Stacey

Many organizational change initiatives are based on a traditional problem solving view. In an attempt to reduce organizations to a finite set of problems to be fixed, the potential for generative change is often ignored. A generative approach to organizational change is designed to be life-giving—it builds organizational capacity not only to continue to improve 'what is' but to make evolutionary leaps to 'what's possible'.

Generativity is an emerging worldview which recognizes that an organization is more than just the sum of its people, products and services. This worldview sees organizations as 'miracles to be appreciated' rather than 'problems to be solved'. It suggests new approaches to organizational learning, and recognizes that what emerges from learning constantly, and learning together, is something beyond anything traditional planning, problem solving, and prediction can produce.

Organizations that embrace a generative worldview move beyond adaptive learning, which is about coping. Peter Senge notes that increased adaptiveness is only the first stage; companies need to focus on generative "double-loop" or even "triple-loop learning". Generative learning emphasizes continuous experimentation and feedback in an ongoing examination of the very way organizations go about defining and solving problems, surfacing assumptions, challenging beliefs and operating values. In Senge's view, generative learning is about creating—it requires systems thinking, shared vision, personal mastery, team learning, and creative tension between the vision and current reality. Generative learning, unlike adaptive learning, requires new ways of looking at the world. It also requires a variety of skills and tools including causal loop diagrams for systems thinking, dialogue to build shared vision, and coaching for personal mastery.

The conscious choice of a generative worldview enables an individual, an organization, or a system to draw from an unlimited repertoire of options for achieving both short and long term desirable outcomes. We become free to consider a radically different nest of assumptions that give us a radically different set of outcomes (including new problems and dilemmas) than we are experiencing today. Operating from possibility rather than resignation, we can create the future into which we are living, as opposed to merely reacting to it when we get there. David Bohm talked about this generative order where, depending on our state of consciousness, we can 'participate in how reality unfolds'.

When really innovative ideas are needed, when the future is very uncertain, traditional approaches to planning are of limited use. The nurturing of generative relationships achieves a shift to participation in unfolding reality. In this approach new ideas and strategies emerge from such relationships inside and outside the organization. The role of leadership is to foster generative relationships and learn from the results, letting direction emerge instead of being set in advance by central authority. Generative relationships blossom and thrive in organizations where strategy, culture, structure, and capabilities are aligned—starting to function as a whole. Alignment enables all members of an organization to attend to dialogue, a fundamental discipline of generative learning and relationships. Dialogue helps organizational members find safe ways to talk about even the most difficult, hidden aspects of an organization's life. Creating shared reality entails examining what is happening inside and outside the organization, interpreting information through diverse viewpoints, and unearthing and challenging basic assumptions about the organization and its environment.

Dialogue results in transformative thinking and action because it enables people to look through different lenses simultaneously and as a consequence become conscious of an emerging bigger picture. Quantum leaps in organizational effective action become possible when a bigger picture gains both clarity and collective meaning for a critical mass of people in the organization.

When the future is complex, strategy and the future are discovered through generative relationships—those that produce new sources of value that cannot be seen in advance. Complexity theory suggests some essential pre-conditions, some characteristics to look for or build into generative relationships:

- Aligned Directness – agreement about a general direction or interest area
- Heterogeneity – differences, diversity of ideas and competencies among people
- Mutual Directedness – implicit or explicit permission for parties to engage in explorations
- Action Opportunities – ability, willingness of individuals to engage in joint action, to do more than talk

Generative relationships are also distinguishable by their focus on listening and inquiry, their active, appreciative, and co-creative stance, and their intent to be clarifying, integrity evoking, and to elicit breakthroughs. Truth-telling is rewarded, partners are committed to unleashing each other's potential, and personal discomfort is a vital feedback loop. The result is exponential synergy.

Generative coaching facilitates organizational learning. It fosters a relatively rare and special relationship between learning partners, and requires them to act as 'stewards' in service of each other's goals, completely independent of their immediate interest and projects. Generative coaching focuses on developing creative abilities; its strength lies in giving individuals new ways to initiate and implement organizational agendas that are not mere extensions of the status quo.

A generative approach views learning partners as co-creators in a continuously changing, evolving landscape that is rooted in their evolving personal identities and the evolving identity of the client organization. Partners in generative coaching relationships are most effective when they function at the leading edge of each other's knowing, doing, and being.

Generative learning communities are sanctioned 'skunkworks' for generating, incubating and spreading highly leveraged learning/change innovations. Their mission is to spawn self-evolving practices and processes throughout the formal organization.

The members of a generative learning community are a purposeful community of learners committed to evolving themselves, their teams, and their organizations in a way that best serves the common good. They find, attract, aid, and champion those going for breakthroughs in both business results and capability-building.

The process for building a generative learning community is a bit like growing a garden. It requires special care and attention. Success is most likely if:

- There is a sharp focus on building key organizational capabilities most essential to business sustainability
- The natural innovators, those who are already seeking change, are involved in pioneering it.

These innovators are supported in enrolling those next most likely to change, the early adopters. The early adopters will naturally attract the interest of the early majority, and so on. The Stanford Research Institute has found that when an innovation is adopted by 20% of the population it is virtually unstoppable; it has become a generative process that will move naturally through the rest of the population. The secret of growing a successful generative learning community is to design it to attract and support the innovators and early adopters, and then let nature take its course.

- Ultra-high leverage ideas, tools, distinctions, theories, designs, and practices that are generative—that not only have life in them but are also self-evolving are used.
- Traditional feedback loops have been vital processes for supporting organizational planning and control functions. Unfortunately these traditional control loops can tend to stifle the spirit of innovation. Commitment learning loops can be designed and implemented in a way that elicits breakthrough commitments and harvests in-depth organizational learnings from the inevitable breakdowns. These loops can weave the capacity for self-evolution into all aspects of the organization. They can also stimulate innovation and risk-taking throughout the enterprise.
- A knowledge infrastructure is built that will support a generative learning community and the rest of the organization in becoming a community that learns as well as well as a community of learners.

A generative leader is someone with the capacity to sense and actualize emerging futures—to give birth to new endeavors in the realm of human collaborative activity.

The conventional view of leadership emphasizes positional power and conspicuous accomplishment. True leadership is about creating a domain in which we continually learn and become capable of participating in our unfolding future. Generative leaders do not primarily command or influence others. They set the stage on which predictable miracles, synchronistic in nature, can and do occur. They create, day by day, a domain in which people continually deepen their understanding of reality, and become more capable of shaping their future. Several fundamental attitudes help people develop the capacity for this form of leadership:

- Servant leadership is the desire to serve other people and thereby accomplish greater results than one could through exercising authority. Servant leaders hold the aspiration that the people who work with them become healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous; more likely to become servant leaders themselves.
- The central attribute of a generative leader is the search for self-knowledge at its deepest level: "Why am I here? What am I here to do on this earth?" Generative leaders try to understand the direction in which life is calling them to travel. If they have the courage to follow that destiny they can remain calm, steadfast, and open to inspiration—even in the face of ambiguity and turbulence. This, in turn, gives others hope and confidence.

These capacities have to do with being—the total orientation of character and consciousness—instead of doing. Sooner or later, people on the journey to generative leadership will examine their fundamental attitudes: about the way the world works, relationships, and their own purpose and commitment.

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