

Expanding the realm of organizational reasoning

by

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In this article I reflect on qualities of mind and how organizations might incorporate a wider range of human values, ways of knowing and creativities. These are key aspirations of learning organizations. I shall explore associated issues of learning and leadership. I also advocate some images of how things could be. This piece is offered as an inquiry, as ideas to entertain or play with. It aligns with other work on desirable organizational futures, and at times contributes different emphases because some of its roots are in gender-related analyses. It draws on and develops a previous publication (Marshall, 1994).

On multiple ways of knowing

I start by assuming, and it now seems commonplace to do so, that there are human qualities which have, until recently, been selectively neglected or suppressed in Western societies. These are qualities such as interdependence, intuition, receptivity and attention to patterns and contexts. Other qualities have been valued, advocated and developed, for example those of independence, rational analysis, control and focused perception. Our development has thus been unbalanced – as many commentators would argue (for example, Capra, 1982) – and therefore degenerative in the longer term, both through the exclusion of what has been suppressed and the distortion of dominant values unmoderated (although it could be described as a flourishing of human intelligence in its time).

We now seem to be experiencing times of change in which a rebalancing of these qualities or values is certainly being advocated, and is also happening to some extent in practice. I will tentatively map this territory with a table depicting clusters of complementary human qualities.

Table 1: Complementary human qualities

Previously dominant values

Self-assertion	Separation	Control
Competition	Focused perception	Clarity
Rationality	Analysis	Discrimination
Activity	Reaching out	Thrusting

Underlying themes of:

Independence	Focus
Control of the external world	Questing outward

Muted, but emerging values

Affiliation	Attachment	Receptivity/acceptance
Co-operation	Awareness of patterns, wholes, contexts	
Intuition	Emotional tone	Synthesis
Being	Grounding/holding	Containing

Underlying themes of:

Interdependence	Openness
Cycles of change and renewal	Looking inward

For some time it seemed appropriate, although perhaps provocative, to name these clusters of qualities ‘male’ and ‘female’ values respectively (Marshall, 1994), as they had for so long been associated with idealised sex role stereotypes, and the continuing predominance of the former was associated with social inequalities between men and women. (These inequalities have not disappeared, but they are not the focus of this paper.) Naming and distinguishing in this stark way served functions. It meant that we could point to what had been omitted, could seek to redress the inequalities of valuing, could more awarely be inclusive, could deliberately balance and extend our thinking and ways of operating (Marshall, 1994). These are still valuable and necessary tasks. (And there is an archetypal quality to these ways of being which was honoured in the naming.)

I wonder whether this gender-associated labelling still has value. The gender scene is now more complex, confused, open, integrated, contradictory. For example, some women now at times enact what might be called patterns of ‘heroic masculinity’; many men show qualities of the emerging values above; there is more fluidity, synthesis, development. (Explorations into masculinities and proliferations in feminisms have played their parts in developing, enriching, diversifying this territory.) I could search for another labelling – that of yang and yin perhaps or of agency and communion (Marshall, 1989; Weick, 1996) - but polarised typologies have their inherent limitations, and I shall not therefore seek to construct an alternative one here.

Instead I will let the above table with its rather open headings - marking some qualities as *previously dominant* and others as *muted, now emerging* - stand to provide some signposts towards an extended mapping of possible human capacities, intelligences, ways of knowing, acting and being to which both men and women have access. It is not, I know, comprehensive, but it will suffice, I think, if I/we can hold it sufficiently lightly. In relinquishing gender-associated labels there is, however, a potential cost, the danger that we forget issues of power and how they are played out in relation to these qualities. For example, strategies of interdependence and acceptance seem inherently vulnerable in the face of impulses to independence and control. We should, therefore, seek to maintain an astute process awareness as we work to expand the realm of organizational reasoning, appreciating that multi-dimensional power dynamics will attend any evolving ‘dialogue’ between characteristics in the two clusters.

I think we should aspire to develop the full range of our human intelligences – individually, organizationally, in society generally – as an integration of these two sets of values, not a neat and even balance, but something more dynamic, pluralist and fluid. This will also involve reuniting split polarities such as our intellectual and emotional faculties. We can also reflect on what wisdom means in any given frame. Both clusters of qualities in Table 1 can take either adaptive or degenerative forms. For example, control can be appropriate structure or can become narrow-minded, tightly held, destructive, vulnerable to forces it has not accounted for. Similarly

openness to different influences can lead to creative synthesis or can mean becoming flooded by other people's viewpoints and losing one's own ground. Expanding our abilities into the emergent cluster we see traces of many features which are currently advocated as necessary skills for current times: emotional intelligence, participation, systemic thinking and action – all vital qualities to develop and all now receiving some attention

I see many benefits in increasing our social and personal diversity, of becoming able to take multiple perspectives. Ashby's law of requisite variety says, in essence, that a person or system cannot see in the external world more variety than it encompasses in its internal world (Ashby, 1965). As we need to deal with increasingly complex outer worlds, we must preserve and enhance our own internal diversities, expand our range of intelligences, respect multiple ways of knowing, and develop our applied competence in these, which often lags well behind espoused adoption. An associated necessity is to find forms of knowing which acknowledge and respect incompleteness (Bateson, 1973). These sorts of evolution are both intrinsically valuable and urgently necessary. Western societies face challenges, especially those of ecological degradation and social injustice, which require new ways of thinking. We need to increase our capacities for ethical reasoning and action in order to approach these with integrity, for example considering how/whether we can live within the carrying capacity of the planet. If learning organizations have no interest in these agendas, or no abilities to review purposes, they are working to limited horizons, and time-frames.

On learning

'The word "learning" undoubtedly denotes *change* of some kind. To say *what kind* of change is a delicate matter.' (Bateson, 1973, p.253.)

Bateson distinguished four levels of learning. I will not describe these, assuming that they will be familiar to many readers. I am interested here in the distinction, which appears also in other models of learning and change, between learning which is within frame - which maintains previous (typically unconscious) ways of punctuating events, of sense-making, and is self-validating - and learning which reaches beyond frame - which allows ways of punctuating events and unexamined premises or assumptions to become open to question and change. Bateson warns that the latter type of learning 'is likely to be difficult and rare' (p.272). It is not therefore a phenomenon which should be claimed or attributed too readily or without caution. This notion of change is, however, advocated in many current theories of human potential and organizational learning (eg Fisher, Rooke and Torbert, 2000).

It has been my hope that developing muted values will have some effect akin to beyond frame learning (individual and societal), that this will prompt a re-visioning of the grounds of experiencing and valuing. Stated so boldly this hope seems wildly over-optimistic, and my conclusion that progress on this issue is slow should be no surprise.

What changes are in process? The emerging qualities identified above are still ones to which western cultures have limited access, because they have been

systematically suppressed, and because they carry much of our unaddressed ‘stuff’ such as emotions and relational aspects of identity with them, which means that opening up competence in these areas is doubly challenging. But more appreciation is happening, some of it suitably grounded. I am especially impressed, for example, by the capacities of some of the young business studies undergraduates I teach (most are 19 to 22 year olds) to reason with a combination of analysis, intuition and value-based intelligences.

It is, however, at best a mixed picture, and I am not convinced. I think that there are powerful counter-trends which are reducing the potential impacts of emerging values. The former include strong emphases on speed, numerical performance indicators and control-based strategies for facing uncertainty (see below). Also I suspect that in many cases muted values are emerging in name only, without adequate underpinning understandings or associated practices. For example, participation is much espoused, and much less often truly enacted. Relational work, which helps teams and communities function, is still typically devalued (Fletcher, 1998). There is increasing attention to process, a potential route for opening spaces to diversity and working with emergence in a stream of continual learning (Marshall, 1994). Unfortunately some of this process sophistication is over-bureaucratized, empty of lived encounter, defensive. Some institutionalised ‘best practice’ or quality processes, for example, become ends in themselves, effectively detracting directly from good practice and quality of operation. (The UK higher educational system is busy with many such initiatives at the moment.)

Too often, then, I suspect cooption, that system resilience is operating to adapt potentially transformative developments into forms compatible with dominant mindsets, which are skilled at adjusting just enough to adopt new languages and surface appearances but do not also develop associated basic assumptions, values and practices. This is an old and familiar story which I do not want to detail here. Some features are, however, relevant to the central themes of this paper. So I offer this brief analysis as an illustration of the more wide-spread pattern of resilience I believe is operating.

In the evolving dialogue between dominant and emerging values, it seems that some of the former have maintained their power and centrality, and are thus framing and constraining further development. Two especially resilient features are control and a propensity to favour action (there will be others). These dominant values may have adopted new facades, become more subtle, but their underlying tendencies remain influential and able to over-ride more muted values. I will view each theme in turn and argue that core emerging values – deeply grounded resources, if we can but tap them - are being inhibited from expression and development.

Whilst rhetorics of change and emergence now abound, control-seeking still seems to be a core principle of organizational functioning. I will give a few examples. Often new processes are being introduced to shape system conditions and provide strong marker influences for behaviour. The theme of surveillance – external and self-monitoring – is prominent in studies which are appreciative of symbolic and systemic dimensions of power (Hardy, 1994). Previously muted qualities which are being developed are being given clear, crisp and contained identities – such as emotional intelligence. Even theorising and naming features of chaos and complexity

seems to have paradoxical, but comforting, effects. It makes the unknown apparently known, affording an alternative form of control. What is therefore less or largely unaddressed, I believe, is the challenging task of developing our abilities to live with uncertainty, apparent incoherence and flux, and do so with awe, respect and wisdom. We are insufficiently tapping those aspects of muted values which could enhance our capacities to respect and work with emerging forms, and to accept incompleteness as a fundamental principle of human knowing (Bateson, 1973 - 'Of course, the *whole* of the mind could not be reported in a *part* of the mind.' p.408).

Turning to the second selected theme, activity-based images of 'real' work, accomplishment and worth continue to prevail. Thus, development of emerging qualities is often advocated by aligning with rhetorics of task or goal accomplishment. Inclusive employee practices are, for example, validated by improved productivity, rather than judged against alternative, more dual, value bases. What is being neglected here is any appreciation of qualities of being as intrinsically of value, as aspects of ourselves we 'contribute' to the world which may enhance or detract from it (rather than these being seen as only significant in the service of some activity). This cluster of muted qualities includes paying quality attention to the present, and incorporating body-mind awareness. Whilst many people are exploring these aspects of being outside organizations, in private development, they are seldom invited or allowed to bring them into organizations as multi-dimensional learning. (Tapping such qualities could, I know, be disruptive and a challenge.)

In these two brief examples, I interpret a dynamic of cooption which could make previously muted values even more inaccessible. Naming them is actually part of this process. They have apparently become more available, but also more open to exploitation and erosion. When these features are found lacking in our organizational experience but processes claiming to deliver them are in place, there is a language gap, reflecting workings of power. They cannot be argued for as they are now ostensibly available. An alternative meaning position has collapsed. From this mindset, individuals may be blamed for not coping adequately, attention is directed away from the disabling organizational system within which they operate. The adjusted surface rhetoric disguises, distracts, defuses the potential for critique. (It is even possible that ground previously gained has been 'lost'. If these alternative sites of meaning are erased and become less accessible, there may be a reversion to more accentuation of previously dominant values.)

Berman suggests that '*How* things are held in the mind is infinitely more important than *what* is in the mind, including this statement itself.' (Berman, 1989, p. 312.) Despite my current concerns, I hope to see the expansions of intelligence identified above contributing to a reframing of mind, or even to our abilities to have reframing minds. This would be a broader, richer, more agile, more inclusive base for reasoning, in more accord with the ethical senses and systemic wisdom we need to develop.

On leadership

Questioning what we mean by leadership seems fundamentally necessary if we are to discuss learning, organizational purposes, and multiple ways of knowing. We need to

unsettle this notion, to question its heroic connotations, to recognize leadership as often a dispersed or more collective function, and more. I appreciate designated 'leaders' who do have the wisdom to act for significant change, and the (rare?) capacities to exemplify what they advocate. But I think that traditional notions of hierarchy are fundamentally incompatible with the kinds of transformational change in organizational premises that are espoused in learning organization and other notions, and that this paradox needs addressing. To do so I will stand between the two sets of qualities around which this article has been written and adopt a both/and approach.

I will have in mind as leaders all those people who seek to make a difference in organizations or society more generally, whether or not this is a requirement of their role. I therefore include people who see themselves as outsiders or 'marginal' relative to 'mainstream' organizational values (such terms would be inappropriate in a truly pluralist society), and the 'tempered radicals' Meyerson and Scully (1995) identify 'who work within mainstream organizations and professions and want also to transform them.' Often, then, I expect 'leaders' to be working with ambivalence, complexities and contradictions, and feeling the effects of these in their lives. (The claim to be acting for societal change is, of course, potentially arrogant and misguided. See below re the inner work of leadership.)

Drawing on the themes of this paper, what might I expect 'leaders' wanting to promote learning and expand the realm of organizational and societal reasoning to be doing? I will paint a picture of possibilities below, mainly using a summary note format, occasionally offering elaboration. My ideas have similarities to notions other people are offering such as that of servant leadership, and many of the activities are already in process somewhere. Two explanations: leaders are of many kinds, so all the themes covered are not expected in one person, and the list is in no particular order.

Leaders would be integrating generative forms of dominant and emerging values in wise, timely combinations.

This would involve moving flexibly between possibilities in an expansive behavioural repertoire, continually testing the appropriateness of one's approach. The appreciation of values would be not only intellectual, but fundamentally embedded in their lived practice.

They would be adopting disciplined practices of inquiry as a key approach.

These would involve critical self-reflection (Marshall, in press) and participative practices.

They would be engaging in systemic reasoning and action.

Appreciating system dynamics is essential to framing and positioning action which is change-intending. Also leaders require awareness of their own behaviours as aspects of the system, and an ability to ask themselves if they are simply completing a perverse system pattern rather than pursuing valuable purposes. Working in an engaged way with systems means working with uncertainty, with the unfolding edges of experience.

They would be opening spaces of possibility, and working competently within them.

These spaces can take many forms, ranging from brief moments of engagement with one or two others to more formal gatherings with pre-publicised agendas. Spaces may be opened to allow a diversity of voices, values and perspectives to be expressed. They might be forums in which dominant organizational meanings and assumptions can be made more apparent and brought into question. (Currently popular notions of stakeholder dialogues are examples of such spaces, and of their challenging nature.) Often such work requires engaging imagery, symbolism, intuition. Outcomes cannot be determined, or anticipated; leaders have to be willing to open spaces and see what emerges.

But opened spaces can be uncertain and dangerous places for all concerned. Special skills, competences and qualities of being are required to operate within them. Spaces can, for example, be filled again with control (overt or more subtle), power, anxiety, predetermined secret plans. Invitations to participate fully and honestly are especially prey to those who will use power against others. People can be made vulnerable. Leaders need to cultivate the skills of working competently in spaces which have been opened, and to develop ways to support other people in this work. These will include an astute, multi-dimensional, appreciation of the dynamics of power.

They would be engaging in inner work to clarify and monitor their own purposes and ways of operating.

This would include using disciplines of self-reflection to counter the potential arrogance of believing oneself a leader and right about organizational, societal or planetary needs; to develop and deepen wisdom; to know how to operate beyond self-interest. It would involve systematic formats for listening to others, to avoid the notion of leader as heroic individual.

They would be operating from a profound sense of interdependence, concerned at fitting into a wider social, global and planetary sense of development (and recognising how elusive this is to identify), and also working actively with their own uniqueness.

They would be intrigued by the lived and processual, working with what emerges, with unfolding and evolving processes, with ebbs and flows of energy, and allowing mystery and incompleteness.

They would be working paradoxically with power, both using and undoing power and privilege as a dynamic of leadership.

Hierarchies of power to shape meanings and assign values are remarkably persistent, even in attempts to change. Notions of leadership can be stability maintaining unless they are radically transformed. One step in this direction is to acknowledge and find ways to work against privilege. Those who can do this, paradoxically using their position and attributed power to do so, have magician qualities which we need to explore (Fisher et al, 2000). Chambers (1997), approaching these issues from an international development context, has at least some beginning strategies to suggest. He asks how people from the privileged 'North' of the planet should approach those from the economically deprived 'South' of the planet who they are seeking to help.

One key is to adopt an approach of ‘*Putting the first last*’ (Chambers, 1997).

He suggests cultivating practices such as profound listening, learning, working with what emerges, handing over symbols of authority and paying full respect to other people’s being. These are challenging to adopt, as much leadership activity encourages – perhaps requires - the maintenance of authority, credibility, control and power, however informally expressed. In current organizational settings, there is often a tensions to be managed here, between truly modelling and enacting inclusion and alternative possibilities, and the risk that this will undermine people’s attributions of leadership.

They would be generating alternative forms of practice and organization, seeking congruence with espoused values, modelling these and make them more available to others through experience and example.

They would be deeply grounded in their own sense of being, which they would have explored and extended through their own living inquiry and tested to its limits in their experiences.

They would pay attention to, and be able to discuss, purposes – their own, and those of the organizations in which they operate.

Reflections

In the previous section I have knowingly painted a somewhat idealised picture, letting a sense of possible aspirations overcome caution. I let the initial form in which these possibilities of leadership emerged for me shape my writing format. The list is therefore an evocation of expanded possibilities, and it is offered not as a prescription but in the spirit of inquiry. (As I review it one last time, I note that some elements are expressed as unitary tendencies, whereas in most cases some handling of contradiction, living in paradox is required.) It is grounded in ideas, and also in my own experiences and discussions with other people about the edges we seek to live on, experimenting with maintaining a continual awareness of and interplay between previously dominant and possibly emerging qualities of being and action. This often feels like a challenging ‘place’ to live.

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