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The Case for a New Approach to Change

“Change is not what it used to be. The status quo will no longer be the best way forward . . . we are entering an Age of Unreason, when the future, in so many areas, is there to be shaped, by us and for us; a time when the only prediction that will hold true is that no predictions will hold true; a time, therefore, for bold imaginings in private life as well as public, for thinking the unlikely and doing the unreasonable.”

Charles Handy, The Age of Unreason

AS WE ENTER THE 21st CENTURY, there has been a fundamental shift in how we see and experience the world. This phenomena, frequently called a “paradigm shift,” calls for new approaches to the theory and practice of organization change. In this chapter, we will briefly describe some of the changes that are observable in the arenas of the natural and social sciences and look at the impact of those changes on organizations and on organization change theories and practice. Finally, we will look at Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as both a theory and practice for organizational transformation.

The Emerging Paradigm

We are living in a time of unprecedented and unpredictable change. The impact of this rapid pace of change on all of our human systems—families, schools, organizations, communities, governments—has become the focus of great interest and concern.

"We've reached a Breakpoint!" George Land and Beth Jarman (1992) write in *Breakpoint and Beyond*. "Breakpoint change abruptly and powerfully breaks the critical links that connect anyone or anything with the past. What we are experiencing today is absolutely unprecedented in all of humanity's recorded history. We have run into change so different from anything preceding it that it totally demolishes normal standards. It has swept us into a massive transformation that will completely reorder all we know about living in this world" (p. 5). What Land and Jarman are describing is a world in the midst of an emerging paradigm, a shift in the way we understand and perceive the world.

In 1970, Thomas Kuhn defined "paradigm" in a book titled *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*:

"Paradigmatic change is change in the way that problems are posed and solved; change in the unconscious beliefs about what is 'real'; change in the basic priorities and choices about what problems to pursue and what social ends to serve; change in those approaches and solutions which display the whole world view as a coherent whole."

Later, Fritjof Capra (1996) defined *social paradigm* as "a constellation of concepts, values, perceptions, and practices shared by a community, which forms a particular vision of reality that is the basis of the way the community organizes itself."

If we are, indeed, in the midst of an emerging paradigm, just what does that mean? Jane recalls, "My grandmother used to tell a story about finding me, a three-year-old, in the center hall of her house holding the earphone and speaking into the mouthpiece of the apparatus that we called a telephone. Our phone number was 339. I was talking to the operator (my Grandmother called her 'Central') trying to arrange to speak to God about coming to take back my newly arrived baby sister. Nearly sixty years later, standing on a hill outside Johannesburg, South Africa, I heard a ring in my purse and reached in to retrieve my cell phone. The call was from a friend in the United States. Under that night sky in that faraway place, I heard the voices of home.

"When Apollo lifted off to take earthlings to walk the face of the moon, my mother, Marjorie Magruder, and her sisters were within sight of the event, looking into the cloudy sky to watch the rocket rise above the earth. My mother was 61 years old in 1969. I asked her why she wanted to attend the launch and she said, 'I remember when I went to school in a wagon drawn by a mule; I remember the first time I heard a radio or saw a telephone or had indoor plumbing. I went to college in my Uncle's Model-A Ford and we had to back up Valley Hill outside Greenwood. If we went up in forward gear, the gas could not get to the engine because of the angle of ascent. I learned to drive in that Model A. I first flew on an airplane in my forties; first owned a TV in the late 1950s. There are still people in my home town who do not believe that we are really sending people to walk on the moon. I wouldn't miss it for the world!'"

In the 1960s, Alvin Toffler wrote a mind-bending book called *Future Shock* in which he talked not just of change, but of the changing rate of change. Those born early in the 20th Century (our parent's generation) have experienced change in both speed and kind unimaginable in all of human history. Toffler and others scanning and predicting the future were like modern prophets, seeing the waves of an emerging paradigm that would call all of what we "know" and "believe" into question.

What happens in a society in which you can now buy a birthday card with a singing message that holds as much computer power as did those first room-sized machines with their punch cards? This unimaginable increase in computer power happened, for all practical purposes, in the last half of the 20th Century. What will be the effect on the human and social systems of the flood of information, accurate and inaccurate, that is available and accessible across the globe? Communication technology is driving our assumptions about how the world really is, about what is true and real, and about what tomorrow will bring. As Jane recalls, "I tried to teach my grandmother to use a dial telephone. My four-year-old granddaughter taught me how to use the drawing function on my computer! My mother was awed by a man going to the moon. Thirty years later, we hardly notice when one of our satellites soars beyond our solar system."

As we embrace the technology that has turned us into a global village and made us space travelers, how do we integrate our beliefs, our values, our sense of who we are into some coherent theory?

There are as many theories and explanations of the phenomena of change as there are theorists and explainers. Appreciative Inquiry is grounded in several of those. Two of particular interest are (1) the impact of the New Sciences (quantum

physics; chaos; complexity, and string theory) on human systems and (2) social constructionism (the idea that we create our world by the conversations we have with one another).

Roots and Realities of Our Existing Paradigm

Let's begin in the 15th Century when the dogma of religion and mythic systems that explained the world to our ancestors was giving way to what we call "modern" science and the ascendancy of observation and experimentation. The struggle for intellectual authority was shifting as the emphasis on revelation and reflection, the purviews of the Church, gave way to the theories and experiments of "pure" science, the assertion that truth could be observed, weighed, and measured. After two centuries of ferment, 17th Century classical mechanics emerged, a view of the world that has dominated much of Western thinking since.

Classical (Newtonian) mechanics is the science of how bodies move in our universe. The assumption is that the universe is a vast machine with interacting parts much like a clock. Each part has only a few properties and movements, determined by its mass and the forces acting on it. This view was articulated by the philosophers Descartes and Locke during the time when philosophy and science were the same discipline, and scientifically by Galileo. The key concepts are space, time, mass, forces, and particles. Anything else, such as consciousness, has remained outside the realm of physics altogether.

Newton's work and that of his predecessors led to the scientific paradigm that has dominated our view of what is real for several centuries. Frederick Taylor's early theories of "scientific management" came out of that paradigm, applying the image of a machine to a human system. When studies of the importance of human behavior in organizations began to be developed by social scientists in the 1940s (most notably by Kurt Lewin and his colleagues, Ken Benne, Leland Bradford, and Ron Lippett, who in 1947 founded the National Training Laboratory, now known as the NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science), it was often assumed that one could measure human behavior using the methods of the natural sciences. It was assumed that human behavior was governed by the same principles as the material world: cause and effect, natural hierarchy, force exerted to cause movement, and individuals as separate and isolated "parts."

Margaret Wheatley (1994) in her book, *Leadership and the New Science*, describes the impact of this thinking on our behavior and on our organizations.

"Each of us lives and works in organizations designed from Newtonian images of the universe. We manage by separating things into parts; we believe that influence occurs as a direct result of force exerted from one person to another; we engage in complex planning for a world that we keep expecting to be predictable; and, we search continually for better methods of objectively perceiving the world. These assumptions come to us from seventeenth-century physics, from Newtonian mechanics. They are the base from which we design and manage organizations and from which we do research in all of the social sciences. Intentionally or not, we work from a worldview that has been derived from the natural sciences.

"Scientists in many different disciplines are questioning whether we can adequately explain how the world works by using the machine imagery created in the 17th Century. . . . In the machine model, one must understand parts. Things can be taken apart, dissected literally or representationally (as we have done with business functions and academic disciplines), and then put back together without any significant loss. The assumption is that by comprehending the workings of each piece, the whole can be understood. The Newtonian model of the world is characterized by materialism and reductionism—focus on things rather than relationships and a search, in physics, for the basic building blocks of matter." (p. 8)

The New Sciences

In 1927, a group of scientists met in Denmark to discuss revolutionary new discoveries in physics. As technology and new methods of experimentation made possible new discoveries in the realm of sub-atomic particles, all of the orthodoxy of classical physics was being called into question. Albert Einstein and Danish physicist Niels Bohr had been embroiled in a difference of opinion often referred to as the Copenhagen Debates. Bohr had discovered that two particles separated by a vast distance were able to behave coherently as if they were communicating instantaneously. Einstein argued that it wasn't possible because the information between the two would have to travel faster than the speed of light. Bohr argued that such speed would be required only if one assumed that the two particles were separate and independent units. And the paradigm began to shift! What if all things are connected? From the conference in Copenhagen came public statements about these new discoveries that were so confounding the physicists. Since that time, terms

such as quantum physics, chaos theory, self-organizing systems, and complexity theory have become common in our vocabulary.

While classical physics focuses on parts, the common denominator of the new sciences is the search for a theory of wholeness. The language of these new sciences has a major impact on how we think about human systems. Certainly the language of quantum physics challenges our most sacred assumptions about the concepts of organization development. Here are a few of the dilemmas:

While classical physics speaks of waves and particles as separate, quantum theory suggests that there is a wave/particle duality (a wavicle) and that these basic building blocks of the universe have the potential to behave as a wave or as a particle, depending on their surroundings. This means that we can never know the momentum (wave) and the position (particle) of these quantum entities at the same time. This turns Newtonian determinism on its head, as the predictability that B will always follow A, as Newton proved, gives way to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle: B *may* follow A and there is a probability that it will do so, but there is no certainty (Marshall, 1997).

Classical physics describes complex things as reducible to a few simple absolute and unchanging components. This is "What is." Quantum physics describes the phenomena of the new properties that come from the combination or relationships of simple things. Possibility is the key. Every quantum in the universe has the potential to be here *and* there, now *and* then. In classical physics things happen as part of a chain of events, of cause and effect. In quantum reality, all things move in harmony as some part of a larger, invisible whole. We might describe this as a quantum shift! From understanding the world as parts, each alone in space and time linked only through force, quantum physics presents us with a universe in which every part is linked to every other part.

This view of the way the world works challenges any assumption about being able to isolate one thing from another, and it goes further to suggest that the observer cannot be separated from that which is observed. It challenges us to re-examine our assumptions about how organizations function as well.

Chaos theory presents another challenge to Newton's clockwork universe with its predictable tides and planetary motion. In chaos theory, very simple patterns become complex and unpredictable, as demonstrated by fractals, weather patterns, and the stock market. No level of accuracy is exact enough for long-term predictions. Such an idea rocks the very foundation of such organizational sacred cows

as long-range planning, which in its most linear application requires a belief in a reasonable amount of predictability in the future.

Self-organizing systems behave in the reverse way. A complex and unpredictable situation develops into a larger, more ordered pattern like a whirlpool or a living organism. Although most organizations have, no doubt, experienced the sudden clarity that can come out of seeming chaotic situations, few have learned to embrace chaos, often short-circuiting times and situations that hold the potential for high levels of innovation and creativity.

Complexity theory, the focus of study at the Sante Fe Institute, is most often described as "order at the edge of chaos." It is also the study of complex systems that cannot be reduced to simple parts. Along with quantum and chaos theory, complexity theory focuses on the emergent whole that cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts. It involves unpredictability, nonlinear and discontinuous change—the phenomena that lead to surprising new forms (Marshall & Zohar, 1998).

Wheatley (1994) writes:

"In *New Science*, the underlying currents are a movement toward holism, toward understanding the system as a system and giving primary value to the relationships that exist among seemingly discrete parts. . . . When we view systems from this perspective we enter an entirely new landscape of connections, of phenomena that cannot be reduced to simple cause and effect, and of the constant flux of dynamic processes." (p. 8)

Table 1.1 illustrates the kinds of shifts that are occurring in response to our broader vision of science. In this post-modern era, the marvel is that all of these things are present and in good order.

These "new sciences" give us radically different ways of making sense of our world. The most exciting ramification for the field of organization change/transformation is the realization that organizations as living systems do not have to look continually for which part is causing a problem or which project is not living up to some set of criteria. The "new" science embraces the magnificent complexity of our world while assuring us that built into the very fabric of the universe are processes and potentials enough to help us and all of our organizations move toward our highest and most desired visions.

Table 1.1. Current and Emerging Paradigms

Current Scientific Paradigm	Emerging Paradigm
Newtonian mechanics; reductionist and dichotomous thinking	Quantum physics and new sciences: self-organizing systems; chaos theory; complexity theory
We search for a model or method of objectively perceiving the world.	We accept the complexity and subjectivity of the world.
We engage in complex planning for a world we expect to be predictable.	Planning is understood to be a process of constant re-evaluation.
We understand language as the descriptor of reality: "I'll believe it when I see it."	We understand language as the creator of reality: "I'll see it when I believe it."
We see information as power.	We see information as a primal creative force.
We believe in reductionism, i.e., things can be best understood when they are broken into parts.	We seek to understand wholeness and the interconnectedness of all things.
We engage in dichotomous thinking.	We search for harmony and the common threads of our dialogue.
We believe that there is only one truth for which we must search.	We understand truth to be dependent on the context and the current reality.
We believe that influence occurs as a direct result of force exerted from one person to another, i.e., cause and effect.	We understand that influence occurs as a natural part of human interaction.
We live in a linear and hierarchical world.	We live in a circular world of relationships and cooperation.

The Dilemma of the Human Brain

Before we leave the world of "hard" science to look at the social sciences (as we will do in Chapter 2), a word about the human brain. Our brains seem to be hard-wired to create order. What we call "reality" is the intersection of our brain's capacity to bring order out of incoming sensory data. This compulsion to order serves us well. The transmission of information and knowledge happens through the orderly use of language, itself a system created by the human mind.

By ordering the world we make sense of our lives and experiences. Although biological studies show that our brains gather data in a neural network—a seemingly chaotic process—the compulsion to make sense of the data is always present. There are those who crave and seem to need an orderly world in all aspects. For others, high levels of ambiguity are fairly comfortable and the need to bring order comes more slowly and more options are tolerated. Whatever our preference, we live in a world that continually reinforces “order” as the preferred state.

And so it is that the Newtonian paradigm fits nicely into the comfort zone for most of us. It is hard, if not impossible, to wrap our brains around such questions as: “Is order essential to the structure of the universe or is it simply a product of human perception?” The challenge is to step out of our dichotomous, simple, and orderly version of the universe and embrace those “wavicles” until we engage with them. Whether we experience wave or particle will depend on what we seek.

And so we come again to “social constructionism” and Appreciative Inquiry. In Chapter 2 we will look at the theoretical basis for AI from a social science point of view, asking: “How is it that we know what we know?” Suffice it to say that in its simplest form, social constructionism suggests that we create the world by the language we use to describe it and we experience the world in line with the images we hold about it. The Appreciative Inquiry process provides human systems with a way of inquiring into the past and present, seeking out those things that are life-giving and affirming as a basis for creating images of a generative and creative future.

Thinking About Problems Using the New Paradigm

So what about all those problems caused by this changing rate of change? Does AI just ignore those? Are we engaging in denial? Doesn't organization development as a method promote the identification and resolution of problems? Indeed, the practice of OD has traditionally highlighted deficits in the belief that the organization can be returned to a healthy state. Appreciative Inquiry would seem to suggest that by *focusing* on the deficit, we simply *create more* images of deficit and potentially overwhelm the system with images of what is “wrong.” All too often, the process of assessing deficits includes a search for *who* is to blame. This leads to people being resistant to the change effort and to a large amount of literature in the field describing ways to deal with that resistance.

In Appreciative Inquiry, we take a different perspective. When we define a situation as a “problem” it means that we have an image of how that situation ought

to be—how we'd like it to be. Appreciative Inquiry suggests that, by focusing on that image of health and wholeness, the organization's energy moves to make the image real. Indeed, the seeds of the solution are in the images, and therefore it is not unusual to see a system shift directions "at the speed of imagination!"

In the early days of working with Appreciative Inquiry, we compared problem solving and Appreciative Inquiry (See Figure 3.4 in Chapter 3) as if the two were parallel processes, with one being superior to the other. If AI is seen as just one more organization development methodology, it might usefully be compared to traditional problem solving. If, however, we shift into new paradigm thinking, AI becomes not a methodology, but *a way of seeing and being* in the world. In other words, when we are using the AI frame, we do not see problems and solutions as separate, but rather as a coherent whole made up of our wishes for the future and our path toward that future.

The commitment to our current deficit-based paradigm is our "default setting," as it were. That paradigm places high value on the machine metaphor (that we can take things apart, fix what is broken, and return to some ideal state). It takes a great deal of "re-training" of our thought processes to shift our metaphor, our view of the world, to a more organic and holistic image. Margaret Wheatley (1994) writes:

"For months, I have been studying process structures—things that maintain form over time yet have no rigidity of structure. This stream that swirls around my feet is the most beautiful one I've encountered. . . . What is it that streams can teach me about organizations? I am attracted to the diversity I see, to these swirling combinations of mud, silt, grass, water, rocks. This stream has an impressive ability to adapt, to shift the configurations, to let the power balance move, to create new structures. But driving this adaptability, making it all happen, I think, is the water's need to flow. Water answers to gravity, to downhill, to the call of the ocean. The forms change, but the mission remains clear. Structures emerge, but only as temporary solutions that facilitate rather than interfere. There is none of the rigid reliance on single forms, on true answers, on past practices that I have learned in business. Streams have more than one response to rocks; otherwise, there'd be no Grand Canyon. Or else Grand Canyons everywhere. The Colorado [River] realized that there were ways to get ahead other than by staying broad and expansive." (pp. 15–16)

If we follow the organic metaphor, we begin to value and embrace the unlimited diversity of nature. In such a frame of mind, it becomes easy to believe that finding one truth—or one right way to do anything—is not the goal. Rather, the goal is to engage the organization in dialogue that creates multiple positive possibilities and moves the organization in the direction of the most desired future. It becomes important to create the most generative and effective way to move forward.

Appreciative Inquiry is rooted in the values of the emerging paradigm. In this mode, organizations create and move toward their vision of the desired future in harmony with a world view that sees the interconnection of all parts of a system; that accepts the complexity and subjectivity of the world; that knows planning to be a continuous and iterative process; that embraces the concept of many truths and multiple ways to reach a goal; that understands the relational nature of the world; that believes information to be a primal creative force; and that knows language to be the creator of "reality." In other words, the Newtonian paradigm process of dividing things into parts, believing that there is one best way of doing any action, and assuming that language describes some ultimate truth for which we all search creates a way of solving problems that looks backward to what went "wrong" and tries to "fix" it. Appreciative Inquiry, on the other hand, looks for what is going "right" and moves toward it, understanding that in the forward movement toward the ideal the greatest value comes from embracing what works.

This being said, Chapter 2 provides a definition of Appreciative Inquiry in the context of an approach to organization change that enables OD practitioners to shift not the tools of their practice (team building, strategic planning, organization redesign), but rather to shift the perspective from which they approach these processes.