

# **Planting the Seeds of Sustainability**

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*You are struggling. All attempts you've made to keep your organization stable<sup>1</sup> seem to be undermined by the rate of change.*

*Substantial effort has gone into bringing total quality, reengineering and/or team focus into the company. Each new initiative made sense to you at the time, and all have been beneficial to the business. Then why is it that the ground still feels shaky and you continue to pour as much energy into stabilizing the organization as you do to innovate and propel it forward? **Your goal - having a united team sustainable over long periods of time -- always seems just beyond your reach in your capacity as leader.***

We believe that there are certain aspects relative to organizational dynamics where focus is noticeably lacking, aspects that cry out for attention in order to bring our goals of organizational unity to fruition. Concentrating on what the organization **is doing** (the tasks, the 'hows', the *process*, etc.), cannot proceed at the expense of awareness about what the organization **is** (the "being" of the organization). A holistic approach is vitally important: in other words, to view the organization systemically rather than addressing only its parts. Consider the idea of looking at any organization through a sort of "holistic camera," where we can look through three different "lenses." If each lens highlights three different aspects of this organization's relative *wholeness*, we see three different aspects of the organization's **being** also highlighted:

- The organization as a natural system
- The organization as a human system
- The organization as a spiritual system

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<sup>1</sup> 'An organization' as used here encompasses and/or describes a few people, a department, a group of departments, a division or even the whole company. The concepts presented are valid for all organization levels.

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This article explores these three organizational *systems* which, we believe, serve as the foundational setting for any organization's ability to be whole -- i.e., unified and sustainable over time -- and the 10 "seeds" any organization can plant, sow and reap to nurture to achieve true organizational transformation.

### **The Systems**

Each human being functions as part of life's ***natural system*** and, as such, each organization created (made up of individual human beings) is also part of the greater natural system – whether a country, a company or a work team. All are natural systems having underlying similar patterns, obeying the same basic laws, and existing as ecosystems unto themselves.

Viewed as ecosystems, we can see that organizations (due to their generic composition of individuals) must be considered integral to the larger ecosystem of humanity or what we call the ***human system***. Organizations are simply extensions of the human organism and human life, looking and behaving as human systems in ways that most business people are unaware.

Lastly, we cannot possibly ignore the influence that the ***spiritual system*** has on our experience of organizational life. This system, though commonly unappreciated – or at least relatively unacknowledged in the workplace - is the very system in which we as human beings are presented with the infinite possibilities of life. This is the system that promotes growth, allows us to surpass current levels of understanding and helps us reach new heights. And this is the system that supports our ability to envision and believe in a guiding presence or principle to help us along our way.

**The natural system**, in our definition, consists of all of nature or all that is specifically *not* created by humans. Interestingly, the laws, processes and characteristics that govern nature's "natural" system also apply to organizations. Consider the following essential processes that come to mind when we think about nature:

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- **Procreation:** The way a species replicates itself. *How do organizations procreate?*
- **Evolution:** The process of change-driven suitability for purpose. *How does an organization evolve; what are its constraints; and what is its impetus to evolve?*
- **Cycles:** The process of how substantive change rarely occurs in one fell swoop, but through the course of many iterations. Everything in the natural world is inherently cyclical, the life cycle being a prime example. *What are an organization's cycles?*
- **Balance:** The process of moving towards a balanced state, an intuitive concept with which so many people and businesses have trouble. Nature naturally refutes long term imbalance, always moving towards balance within a few cycles. *How does an organization foster balance within all parts and people?*

Seeing through the lens of the natural system helps an organization focus on its own evolutionary trends more objectively. Asking analogous questions based on these types of natural processes can yield insightful results in creating and maintaining a more sustainable organization. Where – and when – an organization undertakes appropriate and conscious increases in the number of process cycles an increased rate of change also occurs.

**The human system** is all that is uniquely human. It is easy to see, however, that viewing organizational life through our human system's lens reveals similar patterns and processes. After all, what are organizations but human constructs, made of humans, by humans, for human purposes – and behaving on so many levels just like humans? Some of the key human system's patterns are:

- **Maturation:** The process of moving through various stages of growth and each stage's characteristic tendencies. *How does an organization go*

*through "the terrible twos" or experience the pangs and pains of adolescence?*

- **Learning:** The process of retaining the benefits of past experiences, cause and effect, as well as the ability to communicate these experiences across space and time. *Does your organization behave as a learning organization or is learning more of an individual event?*
- **Consciousness:** The process of becoming self-aware as maturation advances. A person begins to develop a sense of self, and becomes reflective about life and his or her role in it. *How does your organization demonstrate its consciousness?*
- **Wisdom:** The process of developing the capacity for wisdom through an individual's maturation. While it may be true that life specifies no "requirement" for the quality of wisdom, it is undeniably a necessary ingredient for learning from one's mistakes and, eventually, for a fulfilled life. One of the greatest gifts is the transfer of wisdom from one person to another. *How does wisdom manifest in an organization and benefit that organization? How does transferring wisdom differ from learning?*

**Seeing the Organization as a Human System.** When we speak of the organization as if it were human with all the familiar characteristics and behaviors of an individual, we can much more easily appreciate how and why organizations function the way they do. Anthropomorphizing the organization allows us insights into previously misunderstood or illusive qualities and actions. Picture the child who has no fear around a hot stove. It is only after repetitively being told "NO!" and a potential burning experience that this child will learn and grow. For example, one recently formed group we followed had startlingly similar traits to this kind of child. It had no fear as it had not yet learned the lesson that the "stove is HOT." This group, therefore, required the more direct approach with more attention to guide it and help it grow, learning by repetitive experience. As discussed earlier, by increasing the number of *learning cycles*, (through training, knowledge expansion, rapid projects, etc.), this group has grown more quickly.

**The spiritual system** is by its very nature difficult to describe, but we think of it as all that is beyond the natural system, everything existing outside the bounds of the physical world. It is the belief *behind* every religion, not the religions themselves. It is the system of linked relationships existing between an individual (either a person or a group) and a 'higher power' (his or her faith, the universe, etc.). As with the first two systems, the spiritual system also warrants our attention so that we can foster those characteristics and processes that support a truly healthy and sustainable organization. These spiritual attributes are:

- **Reverence:** The often inexplicable way in which the wonder of all experience – the good and bad, the small and large, the simple and the complex – can fill us with awe. True reverence often burgeons into a more sustaining kind of faith. *How does reverence manifest within an organization?*
- **Faith:** The capacity to believe in something outside the realm of our knowledge base and intellectual understanding. Faith manifests itself in two distinct ways:
  1. Faith motivates people to set higher standards and higher expectations for behavior.
  2. Faith allows us to set aside the mundane in order to believe that the process of setting certain variables in motion will produce results. Just as the farmer plants seeds with the faith that they will grow, faith means (to paraphrase Steven Covey) not having to pull up the plants to see if the roots are growing. *How does faith play a role in organizations? How would you find it?*
- **Forgiveness:** Wiping clean the record of a past hurt so the parties can move on. The ability to forgive stimulates a change in how we respond to crisis. When the spiritual system is considered key to organizational life,

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significant attention goes into making sure the parties in crisis are able to move forward on more than the typical, superficial level. This fosters emotional and spiritual growth. *Does your organization have a 'forgive and forget' or a 'labeled for life' culture?*

- **Trust:** Having faith in other human beings can only crystallize within the framework of a spiritual system. Ask most people how they know an individual is “trustworthy”, and you will most likely hear that to be worthy of trust means repeatedly living up to those expectations that are our own. It is interesting, then, that all it takes, once this trust has been established, is a single breach of that trust to break it – often irrevocably. When faith is the foundational criteria behind the element of trust, however, people seem more inclined to trust from the outset and to believe that their expectations will be met. It is possible that simply having those expectations is enough to ensure that a trusting relationship will ensue. In this scenario, a single missed expectation will not necessarily shatter the level of trust to any significant degree. *How does an organization exhibit trust? How is it formed?*

Though the cultural tendency in the U.S. has been to avoid and/or discourage discussion (and sometimes even thought!) relevant to “spirituality” or the spiritual system, we are beginning to see a shift towards a more balanced perspective. Integrating masked elements of the spiritual system can certainly provide the most difficult challenges while providing some of the most vital rewards. We were not surprised to find that conflict and fear around the concept of spirituality are mostly generated through specific religious tenants themselves, not necessarily through the underlying spirituality behind peoples’ religious experiences. Though the people we talked to seem willing or eager to give voice to their spiritual sides in general, they were willing only in a “safe” environment, one where trust allows for a high degree of personalized freedom.

This trio of foundational systems - the human, the natural and the spiritual, is at once enduring and complete. Examined in conjunction with our other two systems (the *human* and the *spiritual*), the threesome builds a strong foundation

of organizational consciousness, on which current organizational structures can develop and thrive.

## **The Seeds**

How can an individual – at any level of an organization – begin to nurture transformation based on the three systems we’ve talked about? One of the fascinating aspects of looking through the “eyes” of these systems is that they act as a kind of multi-dimensional kaleidoscope that suddenly shifts into focus, giving anyone with leadership skills (whether formally or informally recognized) the perspective to start a change initiative that can be sustained over time. The ripple effect is at work here, because this initial action will stimulate new reactions, moving up, down and out through the organization.

Exploring the kinds of questions each system spawns, we can then plant “seeds” for thought, “seeds” for action and “seeds” for growth. Though space here does not allow for a full description of all the seeds, we provide three of the most vital for each system: the natural, the human and the spiritual.

### **I. SEEDS FOR THE NATURAL SYSTEM**

#### **Questions to be considered:**

1. Is my organization encouraged to evolve at an organizationally appropriate pace?
2. Is every piece of work considered a complete end product or part of a continual, iterative process; Is there a gentle, stream-like meandering to process evolution or is there forced, mechanistic change?
3. How much of the organizational focus is on nurturing the growth of the “young” to make them into mature organisms that can “reproduce”, versus trying to maximize the output of every individual?



**Seeds to be planted:**

1. *Describe in evolutionary terms how your organization has changed/developed over the period of time you have been involved with it. List current “environmental” factors driving changes and check whether the current evolution is going where you want it to go.*
2. *Encourage short cycle repetitive review so that many generations or iterations happen within a single project or program.*
3. *Estimate the potential maximum workload that you or your organization could face in the next few years and compare it to your organizational capacity. How will your group have to evolve to react to the new level (grow/shrink in size, reconsider capabilities, make process changes, etc.); Will you be able to respond to it without submitting to imbalance?*

**II. SEEDS FOR THE HUMAN SYSTEM**

**Questions to be considered:**

1. To what extent does the organization discuss itself in human rather than corporate terms?
2. How does your organization celebrate the ‘rites of passage’; What about the mourning for a group disbanded; Other occasions?
3. What is the method for bringing people into the organizational fold and up to speed with respect to values, morals and wisdom?

**Seeds to be planted:**

1. *Describe your organization as a single human being. What personality or significant characteristics does it have as a person; What does it like or not like to do; How does it communicate? Describe the state of health in human, physical, emotional and spiritual terms.*
2. *Encourage your colleagues to be aware of where they are in their own organizational cycles. (E.g., birth, growth, death, etc.)*
3. *Create a matrix of your organization's groups and put down your thoughts regarding organizational maturity, life cycle status, psychological health, etc.*

**III. SEEDS FOR THE SPIRITUAL SYSTEM**

**Questions to be considered:**

1. What enables and encourages people to be reflective?
2. Are there pockets within the organization where the response to crises and mistakes appears more healing and regenerative?
3. How much weight do the words "It's the right thing to do" hold in your organization?

**Seeds to be planted:**

1. *Looking both inside and outside your organization, list which parts, processes or people are revered. Also, list, if applicable, where you believe reverence is noticeably lacking. Does your group hold the same regard for the same things as your customers, suppliers and colleagues?*
2. *List any areas and interactions that violate basic trust and moral behavior. Gently begin discussing this sensitive issue with people. Leading by*

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*example is critical. (E.g., not “borrowing” spare parts or office supplies, not overlooking ethnic jokes, etc.)*

- 3. Find someone in your organization you trust and arrange for a discussion about trust. Explore the concept of trust and its underpinnings together, and listen to what he/she feels are the foundational points. Note whether the concept of faith arises (perhaps without speaking the specific word). (Note: if your group has a high level of maturity, you may be able to have this discussion as a group, with even richer results.)*

### **Plant a Seed TODAY!**

Don't wait! Recognize that in building and reinforcing new organizational foundations, no situation is the same. Flexibility is paramount, so prepare to be open to modifications to your plan. The more open discussion you promote with your colleagues the more you'll learn – and be able to implement. Write the authors, harvest your own seeds, but do *something!* Taking even one positive action today can begin growth into long-term sustainability.

So stop *struggling*, and remember: the only seeds that do not grow are those that are left unplanted. It's time to start sowing, harvesting and reaping the rewards of organizational success!