Where is Our Future?

So Much More to See and Learn

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A recent newspaper front page report on the high level of unemployment in the U.S. included interviews with several of the unemployed. In describing their distress, most of those interviewed included criticism of those they believed responsible for their situations as well as insistence on immediate actions to alleviate their difficulties. Their observations regarding the causes of high unemployment included too many taxes, inadequate regulation of commerce, misused funds in stimulus programs, national budget deficits and governmental interference in their lives. They expressed certainty that the number of employed would increase when, and only when, these government policies changed. Perhaps a tragedy even greater than the personal suffering described in this newspaper article is the shortsightedness of those interviewed as an example of the public's usual perception regarding general causes of and solutions to broad social and economic problems. In other words, blame what first comes to mind. Each of the reasons given for the high rate of unemployment as well as the actions demanded for improvement are peripheral to a long term solution to an inadequate number of jobs for citizens.

In these rapidly changing times of quicker and broader communication, of innovation following innovation, and of the failure of long-reliable institutions and processes for meeting human needs, a sustained higher rate of employment requires not just more jobs, but more new kinds of jobs. To the extent that most energy is used pushing for solutions of the past, sustained high employment will come very slowly, if at all. The creation of new kinds of jobs requires the effort of government and the for-profit sector working together, not fighting with each other to create new jobs.

This is an example of a general shortsightedness among people with regard to critical issues of development and sustained well being for all. The importance of finding effective and sustained solutions to the major challenges of our time led several organizational development scholars to interview in depth renowned inventors and successful entrepreneurs, asking them about their learning methods and thought processes. The result of this effort was the book, *Presence.*[1]

The authors begin their analysis by focusing on learning. They note that learning, the core of development, requires thinking and doing. "All learning is about how we interact [see and respond] in the world and the types of capacities that develop from our interactions."[2] Their interviews revealed a difference between the learning most of us develop and that of these interviewees who were able to introduce extraordinarily successful techniques and products. This difference is a depth of awareness so much deeper than ours as to be different in kind and

quality.   The world is so much broader and deeper than the world most of us habitually try to access that we miss most of what influences our actions and offers opportunities. People like Bill Gates saw opportunities to which almost everyone else was oblivious.

A consultancy described in *Presence*[3] which led the participants to delve more deeply into the context of their work world provides an example of both what is meant by a deeper awareness and what is there at this deeper level. A group of doctors practicing in hospitals in a health care district in Germany wanted to innovate and improve emergency care in the hospitals in this district. They were under enormous pressure to manage costs and quality. They contracted with outside consultants to help them identify changes to existing processes and procedures.

The investigation began with interviews of doctors and patients; the interviews focused on doctor-patient relationships. Two of the relationships identified were expected. The first of these was transactional--the patient had a broken part and the doctor is expected to fix it today. The next level has to do with prescriptions to avoid a reoccurrence, medicine or a change of habit. The other two doctor-patient relationships found are less frequent but were chosen as more desired by both the doctors and patients. The first of these less frequent relationships can be expressed by the statement, "Help me understand why I act in the way that led to this problem." Finally, an even deeper relationship was identified, "Help me learn what it is about my perception of the world and myself, who I am, that leads me to live in a way that is harmful. In other words, what is really at the basis of, or what ultimately causes, my health problem."

As the participant group discussed these results, a member who was a local mayor noted that the description of the health care system was similar to the government of his town. He said that all that was happening was fixing broken parts at levels one and two. There was never an attempt to move to levels three and four where cures not bandages could be found. A teacher in the group reacted saying that in education:

> "all they did was to organize the learning process around level one and two, 'pouring dead bodies of knowledge into empty barrels'--they weren't really able to get to these deeper levels of knowing that release people's awareness of who they are."

Next, a farmer spoke up, saying:

> "that it was the same in farming. 'All we do is fix the soil with our fertilizers, repairing what we think is broken in order to get the production we want. 'He talked about how the whole conventional farming mentality arises from treating the land with an industrial age, mechanical input-output view of production. 'There's no deep appreciation of the earth or of the need to work with it, to enhance the quality of the soil.'"

In summary, involvement in this project about health care helped the participants realize how much more there is of their world than they habitually have in mind.

How then do we move from habitually looking no further than the obvious, the first view, the periphery? How do we stop choosing solutions which have worked in the past without considering that changes in the world broader than our daily experience may have made these proven but old responses ineffective?

The authors of *Presence* posit a broadened model for learning in which we go beyond reliance on our past personal experience and develop an awareness of the world outside our daily experience, the world as it is, not the world as we see it.[4] Once we attain this awareness, then it is to this fuller understanding of reality that we react as we plan solutions to problems, as we plan for a better future.

Specifically, the authors suggest that when faced with a problem, we enhance our well practiced actions of 1) analysis of the problem, 2) consideration of the problem as now defined in the light of our experience, and 3) choice of a response that past success suggests. This enhancement is the broader awareness of our life context than that of which we are immediately aware. We need to think beyond our library, our community, and the people and institutions with which we regularly interact. We need to develop an awareness of culture as it restrains us, of ingrained socially approved ways of acting which only seem unchangeable, and of the loci of the power to make real and permanent change,

This brief summary only begins to convey the ideas of the authors of *Presence*. Hopefully, it raises enough interest to lead to reading the book. As an organizational development theory, it is the next step beyond systems thinking

In the short term, these suggestions drawn from *Presence* are worth consideration as library managers struggle with the never ceasing challenges of change and lack of resources.

Seeking partners to assist in the search for solutions will be more likely to lead to success than trying 'go it alone.' The self sufficient attitude that we are or can be entirely in control of our future is unrealistic. There are so many major constraints on and obstacles to our plans that only by finding others to work with can we hope to make lasting progress. Partners can bring a broader understanding of obstacles, can bring influence on agents from which we have, on our own, little chance of support, and can increase the scope of our efforts.

When there seems absolutely no solution to a problem, no way to move forward, think about stopping, backing well away from what has been considered and then broadening the discussion to a context bigger than usual. Those involved should forget about the specific problem and put themselves in touch with the level of reality that is beyond their usual awareness. Then, bring the problem back in focus. If this sounds something like meditation, it may be. But when there seems no solution in the locations ordinarily looked at or with the resources immediately available, looking somewhere else may be worth the effort.

Find ways to adjust the organizational structure of the library so that staff will have the opportunity to open themselves to a broader awareness than usual. The meeting structure suggested in Peter Senge's *Fifth Discipline*[5] is one way; structure each meeting at which an important decision is expected so that a significant portion of the time is spent on brainstorming as broadly as possible.

Presence is a research-based, thoughtful examination of what it is that allows a few people to find especially effective answers and develop successful innovations. To the extent that the behavior which led these individuals to their discoveries can be adopted by a broader range of people, efforts to find better and more enduring solutions to the problems of the day can improve. This opportunity is as available to library managers as it is to those in broader social and economic arenas.

References

1. Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, Betty Sue Flowers, *Presence*: *Exploring Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*, NY: Doubleday, 2005

2. Ibid., p. 11.

3. Ibid., pp. 106-8.

4. Ibid., pp. 84-92.

5. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practicer of the Learning Organization, NY: DoubleDay, 1994*

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