

# From Cargo-cult Management to Transformative Organizational Learning: The future of workplace learning, development, and change

By Mark Federman, Ph.D.

During the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, some tribes in Melanesia – notable Vanuatu – enjoyed the relative prosperity provided by the constant supply of matériel from the US Navy and Military. Once the war ended and the military bases were closed, the flow of material goods ended. The islanders, eager to entice spiritual deities and ancestors to once again bless them with such prosperity, created physical replicas of the objects they believed to be the link between the earthly realm and the supernatural source of plenty: they created mock airstrips, aircraft and control towers made out of sticks, radios fashioned from coconuts and straw, and ersatz uniforms. They mimicked the military drill behaviours that they observed among the wartime foreigners all in an attempt to once again attract the wealth of manufactured goods to drop from the sky and arrive from the sea.

Peter Worsley, in his 1957 book, *And the Trumpet Shall Sound*, named these behaviours and beliefs a “cargo cult.” Since then, similar behaviours have been documented elsewhere in Vanuatu, in Papua New Guinea, in some developing countries in Africa like Nigeria, and among countless organizations throughout Canada, the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. In organizations, however, we tend to call it development or training. Sometimes these practices misappropriate the title of “organizational learning” without understanding what that term actually means. More commonly, management cargo cults are simply and concisely referred to as, “best practices.”

There are multiple aspects to learning *in* an organization: There is instrumental learning that focuses primarily on skills-based training directed at one’s job function; developmental learning with its focus on personal growth and improvement. Finally, there is transformative learning, the aspiration of which is to facilitate its participants in creating an entirely new organizational world—paradigmatically different from what had previously existed.

Transformative Organizational Learning addresses the capital-B, “Big Questions” that concern themselves with what might be possible if we could imagine a future with few, if any, constraints; and how can we begin to take small steps today advancing towards that brilliantly imagined future. In a very practical sense, transformative organizational learning challenges existing organizational practices, beliefs, and culture by asking questions like:

- How can we adopt practices of mutual engagement to achieve commitment, rather than mere compliance, among all of our organizational members?
- How can we enable conditions throughout our organizational environment that promote individual autonomy, achievement of mastery, and fulfilment of purpose for each person in this organization?
- How can we unlearn old behavioural dynamics that reinforce long-established systems of vested power and control?



- How do we collectively and collaboratively navigate the challenges in our environment while remaining fully cognizant of the complexity of the effects we bring about?

Think about the best leaders that you have experienced, either in your current organization or elsewhere at some other time in your life. Think about: their drive; their ability to inspire and take initiative; their ability to enlist others to participate in these great initiatives—not out of compliance or the promise of material rewards but from a place of authentic commitment. Finally, think about their ability to specifically enlist their peer colleagues and more senior individuals in these initiatives while concurrently participating in the initiatives of others, actively, eagerly, and with an authentic sense of committed engagement. Now, imagine if every person in your current organization possessed these capabilities, these skills to engage others, and the ability to create and enable great environments of engagement throughout the organization. Imagine what your organization could become, both as a place in which everyone could personally fulfil their individual aspirations, and as a force for good in the world. The good news is that there *are* such organizations; more important, there *are* such organizational leaders.

In a transformative organizational environment, contemporary leadership is not about leading in the conventional sense of assuming control and mustering others in working collectively towards a predetermined objective, that is, in the conventional way most modern managers understand “leadership.” Specifically, contemporary leadership is *not* about a few, elite individuals creating a vision, expressing that vision in the form of an aspirational mission. It is not about decomposing that mission into actionable and achievable objectives, nor about ensuring the alignment of individual tasks in support of the objectives and mission. Contemporary leadership is certainly not about managing the compensation system to ensure that it accurately reflects the leader’s worldview. Rather,

***Contemporary leadership is about enabling a conducive environment where you can bring people together and engage them to create a shared experience from which an alternative future becomes possible.***

The transformation of an organizational environment (and its leadership) necessitates a transformation in our fundamental understanding of what an organization *is*. In our commonly held, previous conception of organization – going back more than two hundred years and coming through the 20<sup>th</sup> century – an organization exists to accomplish a particular purpose, with everything and everyone else being of secondary importance. Today, a contemporary organization emerges into existence as the result of complex interactions of relationships among all of its members. And by “all” of its members, I literally mean *all*—everyone whom the organization touches, be they employees on the payroll, customers and suppliers with whom the organization transacts business, other organizations and institutions in the same or a related industry, regulators and regulatory agencies (if any), the communities in which the organization situates itself, and the natural environment that is home to us all.

It is the *effects* of the relationships and their interactions among the organization’s members – and not necessarily an organization’s specific accomplishments – that express an organization’s nature of being. Indeed, the expressed effects represent an organization’s *effectiveness*, and ultimately its success.

Notably, it is not the vision of an organization – where a select group of people may imagine what the organization might accomplish by some point in time in an unknowable future – that provides appropriate guidance for the contemporary organization. It is precisely the dominance of vision as the guiding sensory metaphor that has encouraged the type of cargo-cult management that we each undoubtedly have experienced throughout our respective careers. Equally, it becomes the consequential requirements of vision that creates regimes of program-based training-*du-jour* that not only is largely ineffective based on studies of long-term skills retention; notably, such programs cannot accomplish true, transformative organizational learning.

Instead of vision to provide guidance, we must turn our attention to a sensory metaphor that better expresses the conditions of today's world, a world in which we are all *ubiquitously connected*—always connected, directly or indirectly, to everyone and all available information. We therefore experience the effects of always being next to, or proximate to, everyone else and all available information; in other words, we are *pervasively proximate*. Thus, in an era in which our experience in the world is best characterized by conditions of being UCaPP – ubiquitously connected and pervasively proximate – I suggest it is most appropriate to turn for guidance to our most proximate of the five, perceptual senses—the sense of touch.

We can therefore more appropriately express an organization's authentic intentions not as vision but as the organization's *tactility*. Tactility for an organization answers the question, “whom do we want to touch, and how do we want to touch them, today?” among all of the organization's member constituencies. An organization's tactility emerges from its collectively constructed values, and is expressed as the effects which the organization (and its members) enable and create among various *valence relationships*—relationships that encourage binding, combining, uniting, and interaction. Five valence relationships include: Economic (exchange of value), Socio-psychological (affective connections), Knowledge (experiences, expertise, insight, wisdom, opportunities), Identity (the strongest and perhaps most influential relationship), and Ecological (connections with both the natural and built environments).

Transformative organizational learning is necessarily embodied, experiential, and unique to each organizational situation. It therefore shuns so-called best practices and avoids cargo-cult management. It creates *venues of culture change* in which individuals can rehearse realigning their identity away from old practices and towards the collective values and sensibilities that they actively and collectively participate in creating. It reinforces desired behaviours throughout all aspects of day-to-day management, project work, (what we used to call) delegation and reporting, assessments, evaluations, and especially through the organization's systems of recognition and compensation.

I have had the privilege of working with organizations that have transitioned through such a process of transformative organizational learning, and I have seen the remarkable results, first-hand. As well, I have actively participated in assisting organizations working through processes of such transitions, with equally remarkable results. Both instrumental and development training were useful components of those transitions, and both were provided in the context of enabling the venue of culture change that had as its foundation the shared values, the shared sensibilities and understanding, and a shared volition to action required to effect organizational transformation. By itself, without a larger context that provides greater meaning to participants, instrumental training is often only as effective as were the cargo-cult

coconut radios and ragtag uniform parades in attracting the prosperity and success so greatly desired by the cargo-cult tribes, and indeed, modernistic organizations struggling in the complexity of our contemporary world.

As you contemplate these reflections and ideas, consider how you might collaborate with others, enlisting them to realize the possible opportunities for transformative learning networks for your respective organizations. In your considerations, I invite you to hold two questions foremost in your minds. First, I invite you to be guided by your organizations' intended tactility, answering the key question: whom do you want to touch, and how do you want to touch them, today? The answers to this question will ensure that you remain truly effective and true to your collective intent. And second, I invite each and everyone of you reading this article to become an authentic, contemporary leader—bringing people together, actively engaging them, and collaboratively creating shared experiences from which an alternative future in which we all would want to participate, indeed becomes possible.

### About Mark Federman, Ph.D.



AN UNCONVENTIONAL, yet strategic thinker, Dr. Mark Federman has more than twenty-five years' experience in the high-technology industry as executive, manager and consultant, spanning disciplines including research and development, marketing, sales, operations and strategic leadership. He is co-author of *McLuhan for Managers—New Tools for New Thinking*. Some of his recent explorations have examined “Take Me to Your Leaders: Collaborative leadership and the power of trust,” “No Educator Left Behind: The present future of educator reform,” “Generation Gap: Why today’s youth are living in tomorrow’s world,” “How Do We Know: The changing culture of knowledge,” and “Creating a Culture of Innovation.”

Mark provides thought leadership on the consequences of the epochal changes occurring throughout society. His recently completed research at the University of Toronto, *From BAH to ba: Valence Theory and the future of organization*, strives to re-theorize the concept and consequences of organization for our contemporary circumstances. His research findings provide a wider range of questions that can reasonably be asked of practical situations, and substantially more humanistic options for decision making that are not otherwise available to managers. Mark’s practice focuses on Organizational Therapy: assisting leadership teams to develop effective approaches in response to complex challenges of organizational transformation and culture in an environment of continual change. In his own words: “Inspired by the thinking of Marshall McLuhan and a keen concern for mindful awareness of the complex effects we bring about in our world, I strive to create great environments of engagement. I strive to help us all make sense of the complexity of intractable problems, especially as they affect our relationships among those whom we touch as individuals and organizations.” Mark has recently been named Dean of a new faculty that intends to offer a master’s degree in leadership and organization development, and coaching at the Adler Graduate Professional School in Toronto.

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