

ON *PURPOSE*

Unleashing the Human Spirit at Work

(First of a two-part article on Natural Productivity)

by Richard J. Leider and Steven W. Buchholz

In the creative greenhouse that is The Inventure Group, we explore and map natural processes of growth and self renewal. Our work is a window on how people respond to the changes and challenges they face in their work environments. As continual change becomes a fact of organizational life, we see a shift occurring in how organizations are perceiving change and how they need to operate to grow naturally.

A new business process is emerging. For some organizations it harkens a radical new time, a time of Natural Productivity.

Jim Hawkins, a Vice President of Strategic Planning for a large aerospace firm, calls. He has been through traumatic times. Four years ago his organization was in crisis. The end of the cold war and the dismantling of the defense industry called for radical changes in order to survive. Massive layoffs were initiated, reduction strategies limited all aspects of organizational life. The focus was on trying to stabilize. This was followed by a period he described as bringing in outside resources to re-engineer the many systems and processes needed to recapture a position in the marketplace. The compelling question became, "Can we change?" While a few of these solutions proved valuable, a significant number of fixes failed. In the period of re-engineering, this organization also lost its spirit. The energy of its people, once focused and readily available, was now dispersed. Many people felt burned out or fatigued.

He was calling because he felt there was a new opportunity to recapture people's energy and go forward, not in the context of crisis or even change, but in the context of growth. "But how and what is called for? How can we capture the hearts and talents of our people?" he asked. Was it a time to continue to bring in outside solutions or was it time to discover how to "bring out" what was natural in people, their environment and in the new leadership that was now responsible for crafting the new time?

We believe this story is happening all over corporate America. For many it is indeed a new time.

This new time can be illuminated by putting it in the context of change during recent times: from crisis to transition, to a new era of potentiality.

Crisis organizations confronted by the changes that began to manifest in the 1980s were jolted into survival. Many organizations were unprepared for the extent of changes and challenges in their business. The time of survival became an era of reductionism, as downsizing became a common response to the pressures to cut costs and raise cash. The challenge was for workers to hang on. The goal was to stabilize.

When survival was at stake, the frame of mind found within the organization was often one of crisis. High uncertainty created anxiety and left little energy to focus on success. The defining

question for organizations struggling to make it through this time was, “Can we survive?”

Transition organizations not strapped by crisis were also challenged to change as the business climate was transforming. These organizations began to reinvent themselves—to move to new structures, processes, leadership and markets. The time of transition was a time of restructuring and reengineering, as employees were asked to implement improvement strategies. The goal was to achieve new efficiencies that would lead to profits and growth.

Some people experienced the transition as an endless and at times overwhelming series of changes and adjustments. Many organizations tried to bring in solutions from the outside, by hiring consultants and undertaking ambitious initiatives to improve their business functions and processes. The challenge was for people to summon the energy and focus to carry out the needed improvements, in spite of continued change and uncertainty. The defining question for organizations during this transition was, “Can we change?”

Potentiality While transition continues, a third time frame is now evident. Organizations that were able to change are ready to go forward in a new way. Change is still present but it is positioned more strongly in the context of opportunity. The organization’s focus is less on structures and processes and more on people. Although certain practices of transition may continue, the intent is to push beyond the goal of efficiency. The new strategy is effectiveness. This new time is one of growth and potentiality.

Organizations moving into the new era of potentiality are reconsidering the costs of reductionism on human energy and questioning the value of outside “fixes.” Their focus is shifting from bringing in solutions from the outside to bringing out the best in their workforce to discover what is natural to work. The new time feels like a new beginning and provides a sense of renewal that energizes the organization. The new question is, “How good can we get?”

The key to an organization’s potentiality is found in the productivity of its people. Achieving full potential—getting as good as possible—means maximizing productivity. In this new time, some leaders are beginning to question their most basic assumptions about productivity. What is essential to igniting the human spirit? How can we tap an individual’s innate talents? The fundamental challenge in this new time is to bring out the natural productivity inherent in people.

Every individual has an innate desire to be productive, based on his or her unique purpose, passion and talents. We are naturally drawn to doing that which satisfies our hunger for meaning and makes the full expression of our uniqueness possible.

Natural productivity is related to natural resources and the choices we make about their use. During times of survival and transition, change often dispersed energy. Business strategy often failed to get implemented. Initiatives had little or no payback. Individuals were overwhelmed or underwhelmed, and their productivity was withheld. Organizations unconsciously erected barriers to natural productivity by failing to recognize and bring out the natural resources in its people. The mindset was to bring in solutions, when what was really needed was to bring out the natural productivity already there.

Natural productivity means bringing all parts of ourselves to work. It means expressing the truth of who we are in our work. Natural productivity means discovering the right work for ourselves through discovering who we are and acting on the deepest, most essential parts of ourselves. Each of us is part of the natural world. Each of us has a unique life purpose, a gift to give to that world. Our work can be a natural expression of this gift.

natural: *adj. of or pertaining to nature; inborn or innate*

productivity: *n. an amount that is produced*

1. Everyone has an inborn or innate natural gift to bring to the world! Although we may not be aware of it, we have been naturally giving this gift to the world all our lives.
2. Natural productivity occurs when we integrate who we are (our gifts) with what we do (our work). Natural resources and energy come from the inside out.
3. The key to unleashing natural productivity is addressing the question of “who we are” before the question of “what we do.” In order to be our most productive selves, we must have passion for what we do. If not, we experience stress, fatigue and eventually, burnout or rustout.

THE WISDOM OF NATURE

Natural productivity encompasses the wisdom of nature:

Natural Energy Individuals are nourished by the act of being naturally productive. It is related to the flow state that we experience when we are freely expressing the purpose, talents and passion that are uniquely ours. At these times, we gain more than we give away; our energy is self-renewing. People are naturally productive when their spirit is acknowledged and honored.

Natural Environment The key to enhanced productivity and high performance is an environment in which individuals choose to focus their energy and use their full potential. In a community of natural productivity, members have created a spirit of intraprise. Unity and alignment are requisite. The community is structured and dedicated to support and leverage the full spectrum of talents that individuals seek to express and develop. A success scenario is in place and energy is focused on attainment.

Natural Leadership Potentiality is not something to manage; it calls for strong leadership. In the new time of natural productivity, the leader practices an inside out philosophy founded on integrity and courage. Essence takes on more meaning than form.

Who I am is expressed clearly in what I do. A work environment exists that respects and unleashes natural productivity. The new leaders recognize that growth will come from the bottom up and from the inside out, naturally!

Natural Intelligence Natural productivity reflects a belief in inner intelligence and a basic trust in the rightness of people’s positive abilities and intentions. Lack of this requisite trust is what makes it difficult for some organizations to embrace the concept of natural productivity. Perhaps they fear getting bogged down in the swamp of individual expression and self interest? Nature, being about instincts, suggests unpredictability, a lack of control, wildness, even danger. How can organizations function if they trust nature? We tend to be more comfortable in a familiar and controlled landscape. In the new era, organizations will need to trust human nature.

It is time to realize that the controls we have placed on organizational life and all the solutions we brought in from the outside worked for survival and transition. They will not work, however, in the new era of potentiality. Answers lie above “advice.” Individuals embody the needed potential that can be tapped but not ignored. Like the natural processes that can filter and purify our lakes, their inherent talents and dreams are available to produce the results organizations need. Natural productivity offers the promise of rejuvenation and vitality. Aware and enlightened individuals, leaders and communities, by understanding the ingredients of natural productivity, can create cultures to unleash it.

The natural productivity workplace is a place that supports the expression of our essence—our personal gifts and talents. Work needs to be an expression in the outer world of who we are in the inner world. When we do work that is separate from who we are—”just to make a living”—we are not naturally productive.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

When do you feel most naturally productive?

“If a small tree is to grow to its potential, what will be required?”

Take your ideas and translate them into a business setting—*what will it take to grow individuals or businesses to their potential?*

What would it take to unleash your spirit at work?

Richard Leider and Steven Buchholz are partners in The Inventure Group. They are co-writing a book on Natural Productivity to be published in 1998.

Natural Productivity: A Parable

Minneapolis literally means “city of lakes.” Within its limits are numerous small bodies of water created during an ancient period of intense glacial activity that carved out the region’s geographic identity. Once pristine, the many lakes over time have felt the pressures of change.

A variety of influences have gradually transformed the lakes. Use due to the ever-increasing population, storm water runoff laden with ever-increasing amounts of sediments and chemicals, and algae blooms caused by phosphorus now threaten not only the beauty of the lakes, but also its fragile ecosystem.

In response to this crisis, public agencies have responded with a variety of cures intended to reduce pollutants. These cures included restructuring how water enters and leaves the system, re-engineering the drainage systems so offending materials do not get to the lakes, or even resorting to chemical treatments. These potential solutions share an outside-in approach to the problem, in which something is done outside the lakes to affect a change within.

During a public meeting organized to discuss alternative solutions, revealing questions surfaced. “Is there a natural process nature uses to restore itself? Is there something ‘inside’ the system that, if recognized and restored, would benefit the process? Why all these unnatural means?”

What was natural but long removed were wetlands found at the entry and exit points of the lakes. By restoring these wetlands, a natural filter and purifying process would capture much of the sediment and phosphorus-laden runoff. The self-renewing patterns and laws of nature could be allowed to take hold once again, working an act of rejuvenation.

While it was difficult to overcome a tradition of fixing problems from the outside in, the agencies began to explore in earnest what naturally existed to achieve productive ends.

When faced with challenging issues calling for change, organizations have reacted very much the same way. It is time, however, for organizations to adapt self-renewing patterns and laws of human nature to grow and thrive.

It’s Hard to Teach Less

by Arnie Shore

Experiential education teaches less. Thereby it allows the learner to learn more.

How can that be?

In the conventional education system, which includes grade school through graduate education, the preferred mode of education is the lecture augmented by the textbook. Even as the talk swirls about us on the importance of education to the future of our youth, and therefore to the future of our country, we nevertheless pursue education with listen/read models of pour in/pour back education. Were the results not so poor and disappointing, we would have a highly efficient means of transferring

information from a point source—the teacher—to an array of receptors—the students.

There are exceptions to education as usual.

Two-year colleges innovate madly. They'll teach most anything anywhere; they'll take account of student schedules and adjust their own accordingly; they'll avoid the tightrope of training versus education by training up students in more than the vocational arts.

Some colleges, usually the smaller ones, brush with hands-on, or active learning. Students do research; they write plays; some even venture into the "field" to listen and learn, to record and decipher, to order and analyze.

The bastion of the unconventional in training/education is the corporation. That's because they must see a result, or a return on investment, for hours off the job. Whatever it takes, and it usually takes more than lectures and regurgitation, these organizations will undertake it as they seek effective ways to keep employees learning and competing.

These examples notwithstanding, it is nonetheless remarkable that the techniques of experiential education remain so obscure, so much in the backwaters of education. Recitation of their major points is straightforward:

- Teach less. Provide enough to get the learner started. Guide the learner's immediate applications of your minimally adequate introduction.
- Leave lots of room for learning style. Leave all the room possible for the learner to learn how to learn.
- Leave even more room for learners to choose working alone, in pairs or larger groupings.
- Move out and around. Find community resources who can take part in a learner-led inquiry that is organized around an open-ended

problem like water quality, the role of seniors in the community, physical infrastructure or community history.

- Have learners write for others. Also have them present to others and help others understand how they themselves came to understand a problem and its many strands and connections with people and bodies of knowledge.
- Celebrate learning in a community forum that is supportive and even compassionate.
- Do all of this over and over again from grade school through post-graduate studies and on into work careers and the retirement years. Make learning and inquiry a style of living that meshes well with every major stage and grouping of life activities.

To pull off a switch in outlook that will produce a totally different relationship between learner and learning, the key is to think hard about what is taught best by what method of teaching. If you're limited to a single arrow, shoot with experiential education approaches. If you're not so limited—and most definitely, we are not—use books for preparation. Use experiential learning techniques to address large open-ended problems. Use lectures to entertain with observation and integration across fields and problem domains. Use computer and other interactive forums for the dissemination of things learned. Use art and visual aids to help learners help others understand more at the outset of their educational careers.

In a world in which so much is variable, it may be comforting at some deep, almost primitive level to know that a grade four class in Waukeegan looks a lot like a grade four class in Presidio. There should be general agreement on educational standards built around effective and efficient learning. Start there and you'll soon find yourself drawn to experiential education practices and then to the complements of a variety of teaching techniques, including the lecture and the reading assignment. Nothing gets banished. Everything gets ordered up by relative contribution to inquiring minds in their pursuit of

mastering learning, subject matter, problem solving and communication. It's an exciting world, once you get past the massive wall of words spoken and words read that now guard the entry to ideas spawned and ideas applied.

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Life's Snooze Alarm

by Kevin Winge

I don't know when I began disliking my work. For ten years I had strived to establish my business, to identify clients, to carve out my niche. By 1995 I had more work than I could handle and was making more money than many of my early years combined. I had identified my skills and successfully marketed them to my clients. I had achieved a part of the American dream, I was self-employed. I was also miserable.

I didn't wake up one day hating my job. The process was more gradual than that. I noticed I was no longer bounding out of bed in the morning eager to begin working. I began letting messages go into voice mail instead of answering the telephone. Vacations became more frequent and adventuresome to make up for the general malaise which I felt at work. I knew I was ready for a change, but I didn't know what.

During this time, life's snooze alarm began going off for me. Life's snooze alarm is different than life's wake-up call. A wake-up call is a sudden change in your life which jars you out of complacency. Most of us have had a wake-up call: the loss of a job, the end of a relationship, the death of a loved one. Life's snooze alarm is more subtle. The alarm goes off but you know you have more time so you push the snooze button and go back to sleep, avoiding, for

now, whatever it is that life is trying to draw your attention to.

For me life's snooze alarm was knowing that a close friend was in the final stages of AIDS. Each visit and every phone call to him, as he became sicker and sicker, was a little alarm warning me to be prepared. Still, I choose to keep pressing the snooze button, convincing myself that I would deal with the situation when it became necessary. I should have dealt with it when my friend died, by that time, however, another friend was also dying. I continued to press the snooze button until he too was dead from AIDS.

Meanwhile, work had not improved and I had begun pushing the snooze button on my career as well. I continued to accept projects which didn't interest me; working with clients I neither trusted nor liked. Sometime during the slumber that was 1996 for me, I received my issue of *Inventure's On Purpose* journal. On the back page was a seemingly nonthreatening exercise, "Creating Work Vitality", which asked the reader to identify what percentage of time you experienced the following in your work:

1. I use my knowledge in my area/field.
2. I use my most enjoyed talents.
3. I feel passionate about my work.
4. I feel a personal sense of purpose in my work.
5. I feel like I'm growing and developing my talents.
6. I feel like I'm participating in the critical decisions about my work.
7. I feel like I'm relating well with my leader or manager.
8. I feel like I'm relating well with the team/people I work with.

9. I feel genuinely motivated to get up and go to work.
10. I feel I have a healthy future in this organization.

It took just seconds for me to complete the questionnaire. To the first item I answered 50% of the time. On all of the rest, except one, the answer was 0%. Although I knew I was unfulfilled at work, the results of this profile – now before me in black and white – left me stunned. I realized, for the first time, the depth of my dissatisfaction. I was in a dead-end job which did not use my talents, working with people I could not relate to. I didn't need to improve one or two areas of my work, I needed to change everything. Luckily, there was a glimmer of hope in the questionnaire and it was a significant one. To #6, what percentage of time did I feel I was participating in the critical decisions about my work, I answered 100%. I had always felt in control of my life and, in spite of everything, I still did. I stared at my handwritten percentages and remembered one of my mother's adages: "You got yourself into this mess, now get yourself out".

I began to extricate myself from this "mess" by evaluating what it was I did for a living and who I did it with. I realized that my talents were in working with people, yet most of my work was with computers. It is essential for me to have good relationships yet I neither trusted nor enjoyed most of the people I did work with. I need to know that I am contributing to a "greater good" but all I was contributing to was the bottom line of my clients. The only reward in my work was coming from my paycheck and that was no longer enough for me.

I stopped pressing the snooze button.

I did not know what I was going to do, but I knew what I *wasn't* going to do. I wasn't going to continue working with people I didn't respect. I wasn't going to continue to accept projects which didn't mean anything to me. I wasn't going to make decisions about my professional life based solely on how much money I could generate.

I decided to do what I did when I first started my business: trust my gut, take a chance, risk it. I formulated a single question to guide me through this transition, "what's the worst that could happen?". For me the worst that could happen would be that I would lose the material things I had worked for and I would have to start over. Is that too much to risk for a chance to lead a more satisfying and fulfilling life? I had watched two friends die. My career struggles paled in comparison.

I created my personal mission statement: "to do work that matters with people I like". I began terminating relationships with clients which did not fit this vision. I still didn't know where I was going, but I knew I was headed in the right direction. Within weeks of setting my course I learned that Open Arms of Minnesota, a non-profit, social service organization which prepares and delivers food to people with HIV and AIDS, was searching for an administrative director. Their search seemed to mirror my search and I submitted a resume. A preliminary telephone interview followed a few days later and, by the end of that conversation, I not only knew that I wanted the job, I was convinced that I was supposed to do this work. Never in my professional life had I been more sure of anything.

One of my friends who died from AIDS loved great food, drink and conversation. Dinners with him were events which could go on for hours. I believe this is what kept him relatively healthy for much of the first decade of his infection. Now, a year after his death, I was in a position to assist an organization which prepares and delivers over 45,000 meals a year to people with HIV/AIDS and their families. It was as though all of my professional and personal experiences had been pushing me towards this job, at this time, in this place.

I went into my interview with Open Arms with a portfolio of skills to do the job, though I sensed there were other candidates more qualified than me. Those basic skills got me the interview; a passionate desire to make a contribution in the lives of people with AIDS got me the job.

The challenges of Open Arms, like any non-profit organization, are daunting. There is money and awareness which must be raised. Volunteers to be recruited and organized and, most importantly, there are people who must receive meals. Like any job there are stressful days, but those days seem more manageable when your job is also your mission. The other morning I woke up before my alarm went off. I think that's a good sign.

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