

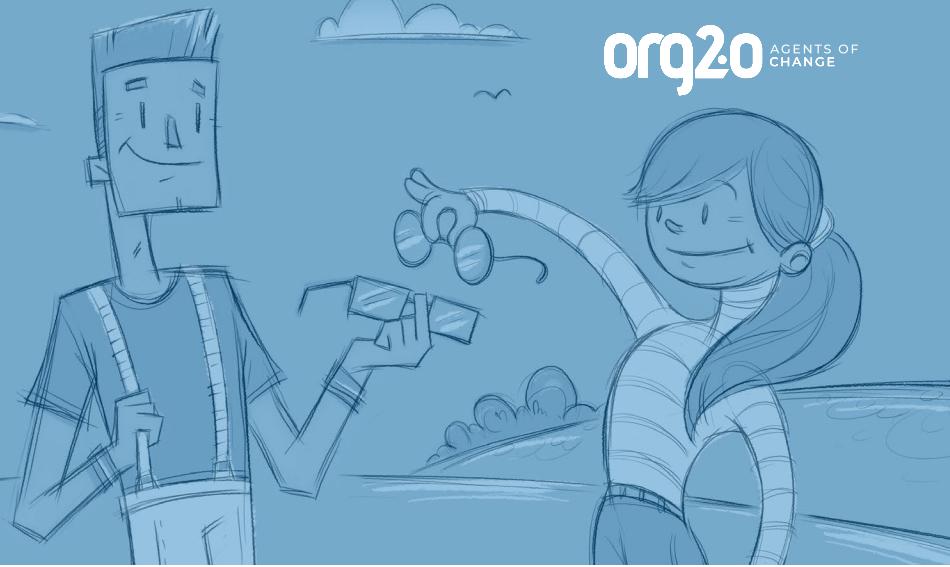
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THE FROG and THE FUTURE

Addressing Increasing Complexity

by Christopher Black



It is said that when a frog is put into boiling water it will immediately hop out; but placed in cool water, slowly boiled it will remain in the pot and die. The frog does not notice the seriousness of its situation until it is too late. The challenge for the frog is to understand that the conditions of its environment are gradually becoming less compatible with its survival. To live, it must decide to jump out of the pot.

For now, there might be no better analogy to represent the existential challenge we are facing. Avoiding the obvious parallels between global warming and the heating pot, this analogy goes much further to inform our situation, globally and at the organizational level. Just as the frog needs to recognize that it must act to survive, we need recognize that what we are sensing requires purposeful action, and then we need to know what to do.

Sensing requires vision without the biases of the past. It involves the act of engaging intuition and understanding the general direction of flow. Sensing is particularly potent when significant tensions are created. Just like releasing a

“The crisis of our time isn’t the crisis of a single leader, organization, country or conflict... The crisis of our time reveals the dying of an old social structure and way of thinking, an old way of institutionalizing and enacting collective social forms.”¹

catapult, we know the trajectory of the projectile. In world events, we are seeing powerful tensions building; tensions between humanity, its systems and the planet.

The planet’s systems are adapting to humanity’s destructive footprint and the life it supports is dying as a result; human systems (social, economic and political) created by humanity to serve humanity are alarmingly unfit for purpose. Humankind is beginning to sense the resulting tensions but we are ill equipped to know how to handle the complexity we are faced with.

Complexity within our organizations is increasing as well and the influence of external forces are becoming more numerous and present. The phrase ‘furious change’ describes this feeling. It’s nature

is powerful and mercurial with a presence so all-encompassing that day-to-day operational duties seem secondary in importance. The uncontrolled uncertainty of furious change often heightens stress within our organizations and in the lives of our employees.

Ongoing firefighting efforts, the perceived implications of failure to career stability, and a constantly shifting focus of priority and purpose makes the workplace a hostile arena. The canary in the coal mine is the sign of disengagement of those staff exhausted by the expectations of change, and the subsequent disenfranchisement from an organization that has become unrecognizable to them.

The tensions we are sensing are the signs that that the conditions of our environment are gradually becoming less compatible with our survival. In her most recent article, change specialist Sahana Chattopadhyay suggests that, “Organizations situated in this VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) world are struggling to survive using traditional methods of management and leadership—top-down, linear, ▶



control-driven, constantly striving for predictability in an unpredictable world. The map is no longer adequate; the terrain has changed.”²

As business leaders we like to think we are resilient. We weather the storms and survive at all costs, but as resilient as we feel, we must sense what is coming; and we must act.

So what does ‘taking action’ mean? The first principle that must be practiced is letting go of the paradigms of the past; those that continue to shape the realities that we are trying to change. Albert Einstein once famously said that, “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.”

It is in this spirit that Frederic Laloux, author of *Reinventing Organizations* suggests the advent of a new stage of consciousness, a new worldview, to reinvent human organizations. While he acknowledges that this might sound like wishful thinking, he points out that throughout the history of humanity, we have experienced several shifts like this. He points out that, “developmental psychology has much to say about the next stage of human consciousness, the one we are just starting to transition into. This next stage involves taming our ego and searching for more authentic, more wholesome ways of being.”³

MIT’s u.Lab has developed a methodology that is being used globally to shift the level of consciousness in the way we connect with the future. In 2015, they launched a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) attracting 75,000 students globally. These students have created over 500 hubs throughout the world and are involved in countless change initiatives including The Global



Wellbeing Lab (with prototypes in seven countries), Novos Urbanos (Brazil), agricultural transformation in Ethiopia and The Sustainable Food Lab (in the Americas and Europe).

These same principles have been used in the work of Peter Senge in the development of the five disciplines associated with creating a ‘Learning Organization.’ Peter and his team have worked with companies like Ford, Royal Dutch Shell and Hanover Insurance to generate emergent thought that has shifted the consciousness within these organizations, building their capacity to adapt to the challenging and complex issues they faced.

This kind of perspective can also be found in the work of economist Kate Raworth, whose *Doughnut Economics* has reinvented the lens through which we understand mainstream economic thinking. Her book, which proposes the conditions for a sustainable economy, has been workshopped by cities the world over.

What might this look like for your organization? As the company faces complex issues, representative stakeholders are convened. The group works through a process of

revealing the structure of the systems that influence the ecosystem being discussed. Old mental models, bias and preconceived notions of ‘what should be done’ are released. Once the system, its components and influences are visible, visions for a possible future can be connected with. Ideas are prototyped and then if successful can be integrated within the existing organizational structures. This methodology is borrowed from Otto Scharmer’s *Theory U*.

Collectively, we are the frog in the pot. The water is heating. We have the following options: we can wait and see what happens, which seems irresponsible; we could try to tweak what we have done in the past to avert what is coming, but increasingly ‘the ways of the past’ are proving insufficient. These approaches keep us in the pot.

The alternative is to sense the growing complexity, and act. To act, we must embrace the emergent methodologies that promote our shift in consciousness. It is this approach that will provide us with the resilience and agility to build the regenerative society that will allow us to thrive as a species, living fairly and within planetary boundaries. ♦

“Human culture and scientific invention represent the most potent force—in terms of potential for change at unexampled rapidity—ever unleashed upon the planet. [...] But we may also use our mental and moral might to win the greatest evolutionary prize of all: persistence into earthly time. The novel forces that make the small scale of our human moment so relevant for the first time in our planet’s history represent both our greatest danger and our finest hope.”

– Stephen Jay Gould

¹ Scharmer, C. O. (2016). *Theory U, Leading from the Future as it Emerges: The Social Technology of Presencing*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

² Chattopadhyay, S. (2019, July 31). *Facilitating Emergence and Sensemaking in Organizations*. Retrieved August 2, 2019, from: <https://medium.com/activate-the-future/facilitating-emergence-and-sensemaking-in-organizations-94f2a7d76fbc>

³ Laloux, F. (2014). *Reinventing Organizations: A guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness*. Brussels, Belgium: Nelson Parker.

⁴ Wahl, D. C. (2016). *Designing Regenerative Cultures*. Dorset, UK: Triarchy Press.