

JUST A THOUGHT...

The logo for Triarchy Press features a stylized, metallic-looking curved bar that arches over the text. The text 'TRIARCHY PRESS' is written in a teal, sans-serif font, centered within the curve of the bar.

TRIARCHY PRESS

Innovation, 'The Producer' and 21st-Century Competencies

Background

In shadowing cultural, political and business leaders in Europe and North America, we have found that people who are thriving, who give us the sense of having it all together and being able to act effectively and with good spirit in challenging circumstances, have some identifiable characteristics in common... They are the people already among us who inhabit the complex and messy problems of the 21st century in a more expansive way than their colleagues.

They do not reduce such problems to the scale of the tools available to them, or hide behind those tools when they know they are partial and inadequate. They are less concerned with 'doing the right thing' according to standard procedure than they are with really doing the right thing in the moment, in specific cases, with the individuals involved at the time. In a disciplined yet engaging way they are always pushing boundaries, including their own. They dance at the edge.

The Setting: Places To Grow

Of the four pillars of learning that we have identified, one is closely related to organizational context: Learning to Do. So here we will examine the kind of action learning that we believe will help to develop what we call 21st-century competencies. These competencies, almost by definition, are also those required to foster innovation and creativity in any organizational context.

First – organizational form. We found that the nature of the organizational setting has a big impact on how the people who populate it develop. And vice versa. People and setting develop together.

We know that dominant industrial models of organization based around hierarchy are starting to adapt – giving way to more networked forms with distributed centres of authority. The plethora of recent policy and business books on 'management 2.0', 'disorganization as the new organization' and the like are full of suggestions offered with breathless urgency for how to introduce disruption and creative innovation into

structures that have become too big or too rigid. Mostly the motivation is the search for greater effectiveness in a changing world. Less remarked upon is the need to free up these structures specifically to allow for the ways of being, knowing and being together favored by persons of tomorrow and required by the dance of innovation.

At the same time there is an equally lively debate about legal forms. 'Persons of tomorrow' (a term we use, after Carl Rogers, to describe people with 21st-century competencies), following their own true north, are becoming frustrated with the limitations of the simple for-profit/not-for-profit split. It is not surprising to find persons of tomorrow looking to work together in looser, more purposeful organizational forms. As natural boundary spanners they find themselves gravitating towards loosely coupled, temporary, collaborative, cross-disciplinary structures.

Establishing an organizational context for working together is one aspect of the challenge. A parallel challenge is to marry that way of working with a suitable legal form and business model in order to interact effectively with the money economy.

The Promise of Adhocracy

Henry Mintzberg coined the term 'adhocracy' for the loosely coupled, temporary, collaborative structures that seem to favor (and be favored by) persons of tomorrow. He identified it as the only structure suited to the prevailing operating environments of the late 20th century and the trend towards extreme complexity, confusion and ever-changing demands. 'Adhocracy', he wrote, 'is the only structure for environments becoming more complex and demanding of innovation, and for technical systems becoming more sophisticated and highly automated.' Adhocracies are designed for the extraordinary: 'adhocracy is not competent at doing ordinary things'.

Aside from its flexibility and adaptability to creative demands, the form also nurtures other key qualities. In contrast with all forms of bureaucracy, adhocracy restores the importance of person over role. It is a form in which the unique identity of each person in the organization matters: put a different person in the same role and the nature of the whole organization will change.

At the same time this puts increased pressure on the individual: the demand to "be all you can be" all day, everyday and in whatever setting becomes a source of stress and burnout. Thomas Friedman, writing in the *New York Times*, warns that employers will ask of applicants: "can he or she help my company adapt by not only doing the job today but also reinventing the job for tomorrow? And can he or she adapt with all the change, so my company can adapt and export more into the fastest-growing global markets? In today's hyperconnected world, more and more companies cannot and will not hire people who don't fulfil those criteria." A heavy demand with significant psychological costs.

Mintzberg too characterized the adhocracy form as typically populated by young, highly qualified, ambitious and self-confident people ready to accept enormous variations in work time and work load. Inevitably this environment takes its toll. Though often idealized as the form that supports entrepreneurial creativity, of all organizational forms adhocracy is also the most Darwinist: 'supportive of the strong so long as they remain strong, and destructive of the weak'. Perhaps that is why the term, and the form, has never really caught on.

And Its Dangers

This kind of loose, networked form is highly conducive to evoking and therefore honing the competencies for creativity, liquid modernity and powerful times. But the strain it puts on people is a potentially fatal flaw. We have seen something of this in our own researches. Some of the most impressive performers were to be found operating in fragile organizational forms – and the strain of maintaining the balance between structure and security on the one hand and freedom and creativity on the other was evident.

The principal reason for people to come together in an organization is usually to get something done. The purpose of any organizational form is to provide a means of collective agency. Yet what we fail to notice is that these settings also serve a psychological purpose. In the words of Don Michael, ‘one of the functions organizations perform is to buffer the individual member from the impact of the chaotic interrelation of everything to everything. Ideally organizations free the member to deal with just so much of the environment as their intellect and psyche permit.’

In other words, the organization provides a zone of competence and predictability, a safe space to protect the psyche in a world threatening to overwhelm it. We would argue today that this protection is both illusory (we can no longer keep the complexity at bay) and undesirable if it prevents the kind of engagement with the real world that we need in order to grow. Further, there is some concern that looser, ad hoc forms inhibit the development of longer term relationships and moral commitment (one of the criticisms of the start-up culture of Silicon Valley).

One response is to improve the capacities of individuals to work in such environments. A focus group we conducted with young social entrepreneurs in San Francisco in 2011 emphasized the need for more attention in management schools on the self-care and interpersonal skills needed to thrive in the fast-paced, multi-tasking, networked world in which they find themselves. These needs are reflected in the meteoric rise of personal and professional coaching. But a response that simply provides us with the resources better to survive damaging organizational forms and cultures is only treating the symptoms.

Our own practical work has generally focussed on creating a supportive counter-culture within existing organizations and then enabling that to grow. We are usually responding to a cry for help from those in existential pain in their current settings. But we also aspire to discover the stable and sustainable organizational form of the future that will best enable the development of the essential human qualities that characterize persons of tomorrow.

Let’s look at two aspects of that development: creative ways of working together and the organizational form that might support those ways.

The Producer

As temporary, networked, ad hoc, project-based structures have become more common, so we have come to appreciate the critical role often played in such ventures by a 'producer' figure.

The role has come to prominence in the world of arts and culture, where practising artists value the presence of an intermediary between their work and the world. At its simplest the producer might handle the mundane aspects of commerce or legal niceties, providing space for the artist to concentrate on what they do best. But the role usually stretches into becoming a creative partner, a sounding board, a coach, mentor, editor – providing both the necessary container for creative activity and equally necessary outreach to a world of relationships beyond. Essentially they take responsibility for marshalling resources (broadly defined) around a creative idea.

For larger collaborations between partners, the producer role becomes central – effectively providing in one person and a distinctive set of competencies the essential elements of structure we normally associate with 'organization'.

This notion of 'production' is very much more than what we find in the professional leadership literature, where there is usually a distinction made between those who lead and those who produce. The familiar entrepreneurial chain consists of a visionary leader who has an image of what might be, a designer who figures out how to bring the vision into concrete existence and a producer who realizes the design. The process seems to work for the production of certain kinds of things – products, processes, changes that can be visualized ahead of time, with little concern for the changing circumstances into which they will be launched. But if what we imagine must enter a future we cannot predict then this design and production chain may end up missing its mark.

The familiar chain of vision-design-production needs to be reconceptualized if organizations are to keep pace with a shifting world. The producer in the arts world occupies all three roles at different times, navigating between the bold vision of a new idea and its realization in the world. As Kate Tyndall says in *The Producers*: he or she "might be the chief executive of a well-developed organization with specialist teams focusing on particular aspects of the producing task, or they might function solo or lead a small or medium-sized team. As producer, however, they hold the full picture, and are responsible for the successful intersection of all the forces at work in order to realize the idea in the most brilliant way possible."

The opening ceremony for the London 2012 Olympics was a classic creative 'production'. At its core was a small creative team led by film director Danny Boyle, all of whom had worked together in different combinations before on other projects. Boyle also took on the role of liaising with the politicians and others with an interest, mediating between the work and the world. At the heart of the project was a temporary space in which everyone was encouraged to bring their full potential to play. In the words of one member, writer Frank Cottrell Boyce, "Danny created a room where no one was afraid to speak, no one had to stick to their own specialism, no one was afraid of sounding stupid or talking out of turn. He restored us to the people we were before we made career choices – to when we were just wondering."

Not surprisingly, successful producers need to display 21st-century competencies in abundance and it is surprising how important a skilled producer is to making an

adhocracy effective. It is a role that is often overlooked in putting together an innovation or other project team. Some mistakenly see it as no more than project management. That approach worked in the 20th century and works today in conditions of stability, certainty and the coordination of skillsets based on 'technical rationality'. But today's looser forms call on more diverse qualities.

Robust Adhocracy

Somewhere between the dangerous, short-term, burnout-prone model of the networked adhocracy and the space-holding of the 21st-century producer, persons of tomorrow still crave the robust organizational setting that will develop rather than constrain them.

The search is on, therefore, for an organizational form that can nurture individual identity, imagination and initiative at the same time as it provides buffering against intolerable levels of uncertainty and the functional limitation of formlessness so that effective collective action is possible.

Just like the person of tomorrow, it is possible to sense this kind of organization emerging in practice – we know it when we see it. The theory that underpins the practice, however, still seems to be in its early days. One of the most hopeful studies is Max Boisot's investigation of the ATLAS experiment with the Large Hadron Collider at CERN. It is a rare example of an adhocracy working at scale and Boisot's analysis provides clues for how to make any adhocracy more robust.

The ATLAS experiment, one of those conducted at CERN to verify the existence of the Higgs boson, is a remarkable collaboration of over 3000 scientists working for 174 research institutions spread across 38 countries. Boisot has researched the operating structure, leadership and management regimes in great depth. He concludes that the form is a loose adhocracy. It is held together by nothing more than a Memorandum of Understanding – a gentleman's agreement with no legal force that 'facilitates a flexible bottom-up process of self-organization'. The structures leave maximum space for creative collaboration and exploration in the search for new knowledge at the boundaries of our theoretical understanding of the universe.

Boisot explored the experiment from many different perspectives. Most interesting from the perspective of organizational form are his findings about what has enabled the ATLAS adhocracy to scale to such size, to remain stable over such a long period, to design and work with one of the largest, most ambitious and most complex experimental machines ever built, to absorb the huge sums of money associated with 'big science' and yet retain its capacity to operate as a real human system engaged in creative exploration: much closer to Danny Boyle's artistic team than to a traditional research bureaucracy.

A number of critical features help to bind the numbers of people together. One is the shared scientific goal: finding the Higgs boson. A second is the shared culture of science in general (the integrity of measurement etc) and of high energy physics in particular. CERN itself, as part of the mix, provides a "keystone actor endowed with some kind of legal status" – a necessary "nightwatchman bureaucracy" that sits on the margins of the collaboration to handle the ordinary aspects while the adhocracy can concentrate on the extraordinary.

Perhaps the most significant factor is what Boisot calls a “boundary object” – something stable around which all the other actors and factors can coordinate their actions. This is the particle detector itself, the piece of kit that lies at the heart of the experiment and on the results of which the whole collaboration is based. None of those involved can argue with the detector or the laws of physics that it is designed to reveal.

What allows this large-scale, shared, collective human endeavor to manifest around the detector is trust and loyalty.

Sociologist Martin Albrow has gone further in exploring the central role that trusting human relationship plays in holding together any collective 'human being' in the confusing operating environment of the 21st century. In view of the critical role of trust, Albrow calls this an ‘integrity’.

The concept of an integrity challenges previous notions of organization that assume people can be brought together and integrated into a single powerful entity – with a single creed, 'singing from the same hymn sheet' – capable of imposing its will on the world. Albrow instead accepts a fluid modernity, in which we all participate in and belong to many different groupings at the same time (we will not give our soul to the company alone). Those groupings are less imposing their will on the world than simply keeping themselves upright amidst the turbulence. They maintain a sense of identity and moral purpose not by virtue of mission statements or tightly controlled ‘branding’ but as a consequence of a myriad exchanges of meaning with their environment over time. .

An integrity can be formed by any group of people that has come together to maintain a sense of values-based purpose over time. It is this sense of purpose and values that holds the entity together rather than any formal constitution or set of black letter rules (more like a family, a social movement or a group of friends than a corporation or even a members’ club).

Individual players manage their personal contributions and demands and the emergent results of that ripple through ever-wider cycles of involvement. The entity self-organizes, coordinated by the shared sense of purpose individually interpreted. And the entity in turn is constantly negotiating its relationship with other entities and with a changing external world.

We have found this idea of integrity to be extremely valuable in effectively establishing boundary conditions for a space in which persons of tomorrow can express their 21st-century competencies. As a template for organizing (rather than a static 'organization') it allows any group, at any scale, effectively to create in the relationships between them the necessary structure otherwise embodied in a specific producer role. We have found it a particularly effective framework for enabling individuals working within an organization to support each other in growing a counter-culture able to support a new vision of practice.

The clear basis in shared values and moral purpose feeds psychological stamina and persistence. The prominence of agency as one of the four critical dimensions through which the entity interacts with the world puts a premium on participation and engagement. And the fact that the whole is conceived in terms of organizing – again verb not noun – always adapting to and negotiating its place in a changing environment,

acknowledges the value of maintaining an effective tactical relationship with the dominant culture.

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