



Book Review — Dancing at the Edge: Competence, Culture and Organization in the 21st Century

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Are you a “person of tomorrow”? Such people thrive in the contemporary world, and inhabit “the complex and messy problems of the 21st century in a more expansive way than their colleagues.” They take “a larger, broader, more holistic, more generous, more all-encompassing, altogether bigger view of any circumstance.” They are flexible in their responses, while maintaining a reliable ethical stance. They welcome and honor the dignity and possibilities of otherness. They energize others with their vision, their aspiration and their hope. “*They are always pushing boundaries, including their own. They dance at the edge.*” These are innate human capacities that we all possess. But some manage to develop and express them better than others.

This brief but thoughtful book is an extension of **Ten Things To Do in a Conceptual Emergency** by Leicester and O'Hara (Triarchy Press/IFF, Feb 2009, 44p, \$15), which argues that the world we have created has outstripped our capacity to understand it, thus requiring re-perceiving the present, design for transition, taking the long view, etc. Leicester is a former diplomat in HM Diplomatic Service, and has worked with the OECD and the World Bank. O'Hara is President Emerita of Saybrook University in San Francisco, and a psychotherapist who has worked closely with the well-known humanistic psychologist, Carl R. Rogers. The IFF was founded in 2001 to explore a transformative response to complex challenges and “how to take more effective action in a modern world we struggle to understand and cannot control.” (www.internationalfuturesforum.com)

1. BACKGROUND

In 1980, Carl Rogers wrote a famous essay on “The World of Tomorrow and the Person of Tomorrow,” sensing a dramatic shift in the culture and the struggling emergence of a new culture. He saw it as a creative moment of growth and possibility, hoping that his essay “will some day be fleshed out much more fully.” This book seeks to explore the critical questions that Rogers was asking in 1980, because the world of tomorrow is with us today: “a confusing, complex, fast-changing and radically interconnected place.”

But how do we develop persons of tomorrow, expressing 21st century competencies?

Competence is culturally determined, and what works in one culture fails in another. O'Hara and Leicester see three critical shifts in the culture: 1) the growing need to recognize competence as the ability to meet important challenges in a complex world; 2) the growing recognition that it is impossible to be competent alone (which shifts focus to teamwork and collaboration, and qualities like empathy, compassion, and emotional intelligence); 3) 21st century competencies are qualities of persons as a whole (flying in the face of the dominant culture, which suggests that competencies can be developed in isolation, one stage at a time). In other words, "Complex problems involving other human beings have no simple answers. They call for judgment, experience, empathy, personal investment, even wisdom—the capacities of whole persons." (p.6)

"In these transitional times, we are rapidly losing our bearings. This is a conceptual emergency on a cultural scale." (p.25) The result of "today's era of a thousand revolutions" is that long-standing frames of perception, cognition, and patterns of life are breaking down on a global scale. We are now seeing "a global epidemic of serious mental distress." Today's level of cultural disturbance makes us all feel anxious—all of us some of the time and some of us all of the time. The instinctive response to anxiety is likely to be defensive denial—a distortion of reality to make it conform to our existing expectations—but denial is not a learning stance. We can also tune out the discomfort by "amusing ourselves to death," as Neil Postman wrote in 1985.

Although we still need to master 20th century technical competencies, we will also need to extend our range, as described in the Jacques Delors et al. report on education for the 21st century, **Learning: The Treasure Within** (UNESCO, 1996). The report articulates *four dimensions of 21st century learning*, which serve as an organizing framework for much of this book: Learning to Be, Learning to Be Together, Learning to Know, and Learning to Do.

2. LEARNING TO BE A PERSON OF TOMORROW

As the 21st century proceeds, and complexity becomes the universal context, the importance of fundamental existential questions intensifies, as exemplified by Abraham Maslow's **Towards a Psychology of Being** (1962), a classic of transformative thought. In today's fast-moving and confusing environment, persons of tomorrow typically display three clusters of qualities that set them apart: 1) **Humility**: acknowledging the fact of our ignorance, as described by Donald N. Michael [see GFB Book of the Month, Dec 2011]; to be in the world as a learner, in turn encouraging and catalyzing learning in others; 2) **Balance**: maintaining our equilibrium even under threat; awareness of mind-body connections; grace under pressure; boundary spanning with hybrid personalities; 3) **Faith in the Future**: a way of being and acting that is aspirational; operating within a strong moral framework; concerned with human suffering and realizing human potential; holding open the possibility of hope (but not optimism); patience and resilience; constant striving for something better.

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3. LEARNING TO BE TOGETHER

Culture matters, and we are sowing the seeds of a new culture of tomorrow. Culture determines what we see, how we learn and know, and what we perceive as competence. “The person of tomorrow cannot choose to live in one culture or another: 21st century culture is hybrid, liquid, global.” (p.86) With growing awareness of our fundamental connectedness comes the possibility of growing beyond the ego- and ethno-centrism of youth and achieving the mature capacity for compassion, the mainstay of all spiritual traditions. This is important because “a growing number of studies suggest that the context of our contemporary lives is making us less empathic.” (p.83)

Persons of tomorrow must cultivate the capacity for conscious cultural leadership—to encourage the culture around us to evolve. “The capacities needed to lead within multi-stakeholder networks of systems within systems that characterize life in the liquid present are of a different order from those needed in simpler times.” (p.90) The beginning of successful cultural leadership is always a small act of effective creative transgression, because in order to shift the culture we must challenge it and do something counter-cultural.

4. LEARNING TO KNOW

The third pillar of learning is learning how to know “in a world in which we are bombarded with information and sensation.” “To live and prosper in a world where what counts as knowledge is in flux requires us to hold our own truth lightly. We must be able to perceive and appreciate multiple worldviews without becoming beholden to any one of them.” (p.99). Persons of tomorrow have this capacity to stand above the fray, to live with paradox and ambiguity, and to recognize numerous workable stories about the world. As physicist Niels Bohr declared, “the opposite of a great truth is another great truth.” Adding to the capacity to see multiple truths, “the person of tomorrow will add appreciation of collective intelligence which in some circumstances can contain knowledge of emergent patterns and group consciousness.” (p.101)

Persons of tomorrow have a full spectrum of ways of knowing where they stand and what is important, and are able to reconnect emotion and reason. They always appreciate that knowledge is in motion, and that all knowledge is framed by culture and context. They are familiar with a wide range of specific tools and thinking techniques, and seek the best available map of the territory to make sense of a dynamic, changing landscape. *They always seek “to expand their awareness, to explore more of the context, to adopt a broader perspective, a longer term perspective, a perspective that recognizes the humanity in any system.”* (p.106; emphasis added). Persons of tomorrow are not afraid of complexity—indeed, they thrive on it.

They also have “scientific connoisseurship”—a capacity to make informed judgments about scientific claims, and to judge the competence and credibility of experts. And a capacity to make judgments about the unknown, based on incomplete and conflicting knowledge.

5. LEARNING TO DO IN ADHOCRACY

The fourth pillar of learning concerns the nature of the organizational setting, which has

a big impact on how the people who populate it develop. Persons of tomorrow, “exploring their own creative edge and catalyzing such a spirit in the people around them, seek 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.” (p.110) Many of these models take inspiration from the world of the arts. In the words of management theorist Henry Mintzberg, “adhocracy is the only structure for environments becoming more complex and demanding of innovation.” (p.110) This loose, networked form is highly conducive to honing the competencies for liquid modernity and powerful times. “But the strain it puts on people is a potentially fatal flaw.” And the loose, ad hoc forms that are now coming to prominence inhibit development of longer term relationships and moral commitment.

The authors go on to discuss the importance of the “producer” role, robust adhocracy, the role of money in our lives (best kept at the margins), how 21st century competencies are drawn out from us (they are developed inaction, but are latent in all human beings: “they are not extraordinary”), the kind of action most likely to express 21st century competencies (it should be inspiring, and can start at any level and scale), “wise initiatives” (consciously designed as initial probes in a complex system), theaters for action learning (the authors shadowed a number of chief executives in different sectors to discover the secrets of their mastery), the “widespread yearning for true 21st century education” (the “DIY University” phenomenon), and the need to “become virtuosos in playing the uncertain trumpet.” (p.142)

6. COMMENT

Am I a “person of tomorrow”? There is much to admire here, and much to aspire to. I leave it to others to judge whether I have yet to embody all, most, or even some of the 21st century competencies to any significant degree. That said, it should be noted that O’Hara and Leicester themselves modestly conclude that the above chapters are only “an introduction to further exploration,” and that “we issue the invitation as aspirant persons of tomorrow ourselves” (p.142).

As a set of guidelines to how we should think and act in powerful and liquid times, this is an excellent start, ably assisted by the distinctive artwork of Jennifer Williams that sets a questing tone, and the handsome production values of Triarchy Press.

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ALSO SEE **Five Minds for the Future** by psychologist Howard Gardner of Harvard University (Harvard Business School Press, 2007, 196p), author of **Multiple Intelligences** (Basic Books, 2006), **Changing Minds** (HPSP, 2004), and some 20 other books on “the kinds of minds that people will need if they—and we—are to thrive in the world during the eras to come.” Gardner’s five minds are *The Disciplined Mind* that has mastered at least one way of thinking, *The Synthesizing Mind* that puts information together from disparate sources

es, *The Creating Mind* that breaks new ground and puts forth new ideas, *The Respectful Mind* that notes and welcomes differences between individuals and groups, and *The Ethical Mind* that ponders the needs and desires of society and how citizens can work to improve the lot of all. [“Five Minds” makes an excellent companion to “Dancing at the Edge,” but is not listed in the otherwise extensive “Dancing” bibliography.]

Another recent and authoritative source to consider is OECD’s **Preparing Teachers and Developing School Leaders for the 21st Century: Lessons from around the World** (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, June 2012, 108p), which argues that more of the same education will not suffice to address the challenges of the future: “education systems need to place much greater emphasis on enabling individuals to become lifelong learners, to manage complex ways of thinking and complex ways of working that computers cannot take over easily. Students need to be capable not only of constantly adapting but also of constantly learning and growing, or positioning themselves and repositioning themselves in a fast-changing world.”

7. SPECIAL COMMENT: “GENIUS” VS. “PERSONS OF TOMORROW”

Dancing at the Edge has particular applicability to the SEED-IDEA published in *CAD-MUS #5* (Oct 2012, pp. 1-5) on “Recognizing Unrecognized Genius.” Ivo Šlaus and Garry Jacobs seek people who “approach problems from a wider perspective...individuals with the capacity to transcend the limits of conventional thinking and the boundaries of prevailing rationality...one who sees the whole as greater than the sum of the parts...(who has) the capacity to discover the truth in opposite viewpoints and to reconcile apparent contradictions at a higher level...original thinkers (who) postulate radically new and improved social models...(who) sees profundity in simple facts (and) perceives universal truths of life and human nature...”

All of these attributes also characterize the “Persons of Tomorrow” that O’Hara and Leicester encourage. But the labeling is very important. “Genius” refers to very rare and exceptional people, and is widely used—and abused—in Western culture, especially as concerns IQ tests (requisite for Mensa members), MacArthur Foundation “genius” grants, and the dark side of the “evil genius.”

“Persons of Tomorrow” is fresher and more vague, opening up more possibilities for exceptional and desirable competence in our troubled times, and inviting many more people to pursue the attributes that “are latent in all human beings.” I think we would be far better served by cultivating numerous persons of tomorrow, rather than recognizing a relatively few geniuses, who may prove to be flawed or dysfunctional. Indeed, the age of the solitary genius may have passed, in favor of cultivating collective intelligence to cope with a complex world. Moreover, seeking genius smacks of searching for a secular Messiah (or two or three) to deliver us from the multiple evils of our time. But the multiple evils are such that a great number of “geniuses” are needed, working from the top-down, the bottom-up, and horizontally in networks. Our chances of surviving and prospering would be much improved by ditching the well-worn “genius” label of the 19th and 20th centuries, and encouraging many “persons of tomorrow” who dance at the edge of the unfolding 21st century.

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