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Toward the Civil Society: Finding Harmony between Havel's Vision and Learning-Organization Theory

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Abstract

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Keywords: *civil society, communist regimes, Czechoslovakia, government leadership, learning, organization, Václav Havel (former Czech President), Velvet Revolution*

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Toward the Civil Society

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Abstract

This theoretical paper derives inspiration from former Czech President Vaclav Havel and lessons from "learning organizations" to guide government executives in helping develop shared meaning among constituents, interest groups and public employees. Such shared meaning is seen as a framework for policy decisions and implementation. American civil society, like learning organizations, is understood as broadly interdependent and continuously changing, with conflict both latent and overt. Leadership is defined in contrast to management and administration; government leadership is compared and contrasted with learning-organization leadership. Strengths, weaknesses and political costs of various approaches are considered. It is argued that successful public-sector leaders must adapt a "learning" style with commitment to dialogue and the openness that characterizes synchronicity and presence.

Toward the Civil Society

In late 1989, as Communist regimes were falling across Central and Eastern Europe, much of the world became aware of Vaclav Havel, the dissident playwright who seemed to symbolize the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. Havel recast politics into poetry, with words (1988, p. 243) like "[M]an has grasped the world in a way that has caused him. . . to lose it; he has subdued it by destroying it."

Remarkably, this former prisoner--an intellectual who had been denied schooling beyond age 15--seemed to bear no grudges toward the people who had shaped his life so cruelly. His focus was on the future, not the past; on transformation and transcendence, not revenge. Even as he moved from outcast to President, first of Czechoslovakia and then of the

Czech Republic, Havel's vision never wavered. His essays, books and speeches continued to hold out the hope of a "civil society," one which "will no longer suppress, humiliate, and deny the free human being, but will serve all the dimensions of that being" (1992, p. 121).

Havel stepped down from the presidency last year, but continues to speak and write with an authority that is independent of an official position.

Inspiring as Havel's imagery has been to people around the world, and especially to those interested in renewing civic culture, it is noticeably lacking in practical advice. This may ensure its moral imperishability, but one must look elsewhere for more detailed guidelines for moving toward the civil society.

Such guidance can be found abundantly in "learning organizations," a term used by Peter Senge of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and others to mean organizations "capable of thriving in a world of interdependence and change" (Kofman and Senge, 1993, p. 5).

These businesses and the theories behind them are based on a deep belief in human potential and a commitment for the workplace to trust, nourish and realize that potential. As the name implies, the learning organization is creative, a place in process, which sees learning "not as a confession of ignorance but as the only way to live" (Handy, 1995, p. 55). Many industry leaders as well as scholars say learning organizations have the best chance of any businesses to adapt and flourish in uncertain times.

The parallels with Havel's philosophy are striking; each has a transformational vision of people in society. And learning-organization literature offers a blueprint for working toward the civil society, of attaining what Havel (1991, p. 72) calls "a society which is really alive."

This paper draws on Havel's writings and learning-organization literature (as well as on related organizations, public administration and conflict theory) to explore the visions common to civil society and learning organizations. I have integrated Havel's work from disparate sources, and what I present as his voice is my own interpretation; the comparison between his ideas and learning-organization theory is also my own. It shows that they perceive the environment of change and conflict similarly, and that they view new kinds of leadership and renewed forms of shared meaning as key to accomplishing their goals.

Civil Society and the Learning Organization

I dream of . . . a human republic that serves the individual and that therefore holds the hope that

the individual will serve it in turn. (Havel, January 1, 1990)

At the heart of a learning organization is a shift of mind -- from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world. Senge (1990, p. 12)

Havel's vision of a civil society meshes neatly with Senge's prescription for a learning organization: a moral community where individuals realize their own destiny through relationships with other individuals.

Even the language that learning-organization theorists use often seems Havelian, as in this passage: "[R]edefining organizations as communities. . . means seeing organizations as centers of meaning and larger purpose to which people can commit themselves as free citizens in a democratic society" (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross and Smith, 1994, p. 507).

It seems to echo sentiments Havel (1991, p. 267) expressed in his dissident days: "We must not be ashamed that we are capable of love, friendship, solidarity, sympathy, and tolerance, but just the opposite: we must set these fundamental dimensions of our humanity free. . . as the only genuine starting point of meaningful human community."

The human communities of civil society and the learning organization have five basic characteristics in common:

They value the possibilities in each individual. Learning organizations believe that each employee -- regardless of her place on the corporate ladder -- is both capable and a valuable source of ideas. And Havel's civil society would "trust its citizens and enable them to share in a substantial way in exercising the responsibility for the condition of society" (1995, June 2).

They believe in unity in diversity, what Havel (1995, 13 March) calls "a solidarity of free human beings" and organization theorists call "a participatory organization" (Peters, 1994). Within such "communities of commitment" (Kofman and Senge, 1993), tolerance, coexistence and solidarity are possible at one time. "[A] truly multicultural civilization. . . will allow everyone to be themselves while denying no one the opportunities it offers" (Havel, 1995, March 29).

Continuous communication, learning and invention are critical to building and sustaining such groups. They are "organizations of consent, not control" (Handy, 1995, p. 55). The atmosphere in learning organizations

is a “dynamic equilibrium between holding on and letting go” (Kofman and Senge, 1993, p. 17), while true civil society means freedom “from the straitjacket of ideological interpretations” (Havel, 1992, p. 128). In this way, people build the state or the organization for themselves; it is not something distant and imposed.

The purpose of such communities is ultimately moral. This is not a narrow morality of personal behavior, but “a way of going about things, and it demands the courage to breathe moral and spiritual motivation into everything. . .” (Havel, 1992, p. 20). The former political prisoner understandably calls for a state that is “humane, moral, intellectual and spiritual” (Havel, 1992, p. 18); but the learning organization also is seen as “a culture based on transcendent human values of love, wonder, humility, and compassion” (Kofman and Senge, p. 16).

The two states never will be “finished.” They are “open system[s] and thus. . . capable of improvement” (Havel, 1995, March 29). In learning organizations, “there is no ‘there,’ no ultimate destination, only a lifelong journey” (Senge, 1990, p. xv). They measure their success in the “ability to repeatedly become” (Rolls, 1995, p. 103). And in a civil society, the ideal of democracy can be approached “as one would a horizon. . . but it can never be fully attained” (Havel, 1990, February 21). Political and economic life alike “ought to be founded on the varied and versatile cooperation of. . . dynamically appearing and disappearing organizations” (Havel, 1991, p. 211). It is the ideals -- not the forms -- that should persist.

Change, Conflict and Crisis

[O]ne age is succeeding another. . . everything is possible.
(Havel, July 4, 1994)

The environment in which corporate organizations must now operate have one characteristic in common: turbulence. (Edwin C. Nevis *et al*, 1996, p. 3)

Neither the civil society nor the learning organization exists in a vacuum. They both must cope with an uncertain and fast-paced world of change, conflict and crisis.

It is a world where even “playwrights, who have to cram a whole human life or an entire historical era into a two-hour [sic] play, can scarcely understand this rapidity. . .” (Havel, 1990, February 21). Change pulls us

closer together at the same time it pushes us further apart. “The sense of inter-relatedness is what makes us feel whole, feel good about being alive,” according to Elise Boulding (1988, pp. 34-35). “It is also what cramps and oppresses us, because we can’t grasp it all.” The result is often deep, long-lasting and cross-cutting problems which -- unless well-managed -- may lead to a loss of trust in business and government.

This section looks at the similar views Havel and learning-organization theorists bring to change and conflict.

Change

Both Havel and learning-organization theorists understand that change is relentless in modern life. They share five perspectives on change:

Change is faster and more ubiquitous than ever. As Nevis noted, change is so fast-paced and unpredictable that it often reaches the level of turbulence, in business and society alike. Such change is characteristic of the “postmodern world, where everything is possible and almost nothing is certain” (Havel, 1994, July 4).

Change cannot be stopped. “There is no way back,” Havel (1995, June 8) told a Harvard graduation. “Only a dreamer can believe that the solution lies in curtailing the progress of civilization. . . .” And learning organization theorists caution that people can neither halt change nor preserve even the most desirable organization indefinitely.

Relentless change makes the old ways of understanding the world obsolete. On the political front, “none of the familiar. . . speedometers are [sic] adequate” (Havel, 1990, February 21). And while businesses must change their ideas and actions -- perhaps dramatically -- to become learning organizations, they have no assurance of what change will bring.

This modern state of change produces fear, nostalgia and uncertainty. “It is as if something were crumbling, decaying, and exhausting itself, while something else, still indistinct, were arising from the rubble,” according to Havel:

[W]e do not know exactly what to do with ourselves, where to turn. The world of our experiences seems chaotic, disconnected, confusing. There appear to be no integrating forces, no unified meaning, no true inner understanding of phenomena in our experience of the world. Experts can explain anything in the objective world to us, yet we understand our own lives less and less. (1994, July 4)

Even in former Communist countries, Havel (1990, July 26) says, there is sometimes nostalgia for the certainty of the old regime; and in the West, there is a “nagging sense” that we have lost our ability to solve problems. On one hand, people must feel safe to work successfully in a changing environment; on the other hand, change itself can make people feel unsafe, even hopeless.

But change also produces new possibilities for achieving the truly civil society or learning organization. To learning organization theorists, change should be understood as opportunity, something that may strengthen institutions. (1) Havel sees it as a chance to escape the “antiquated straitjacket of the bipolar view of the world” (1990, February 21) and create a “new model of coexistence” (1994, July 4).

Conflict and Crisis

Here, Havel and learning-organization scholars share a core belief: *Conflict often is the result of change; and change is often the result of conflict.* This is especially true in times of abrupt social change: Many of today’s crises -- in business and government -- are byproducts of our own actions, even our successes. According to Havel (1993, April 22), this is because “[t]he human mind and human habits cannot be transformed overnight.” In a situation where one thing has collapsed and something new does not yet exist, many people feel hollow and frustrated.” He attributes many contemporary problems and conflicts to the most pervasive and unsettling change of modern times: globalization.

Beyond this common understanding, Havel (2) devotes himself to the spiritual side of conflict, while learning-organization proponents draw heavily on conflict-management theory. The ideas are complementary: the heart and the head of conflict theory.

Havel believes a crisis of the human spirit is part of much conflict. In his view (1995, March 29), people feel separated from both one another and from something absolute -- an “ultimate horizon.” Thus, life loses meaning and values become relative. And “the stronger one’s sensation of being ‘outside the world,’ the more powerful may be his longing to ‘conquer’ it. . . .” (Havel, 1988, p. 288). This may take place metaphorically, in actual physical aggression or in “the herdlike nature of the consumer life. . . [A]ll of these are ways in which human identity sinks into a deeper and more complete state of crisis” (Havel, 1988, p. 295).

Havel believes that institutions and cultures, too, are undergoing a spiritual crisis. The sudden advent of a global civilization has brought

people face to face with each other and their differences. Globalization often pressures cultures to integrate and standardize; thus, many conflicts “can be explained as struggles of different cultural identities. . . for what they appear to be losing” (Havel, 1995, March 29). Finally, the proximity modern technology brings can exacerbate conflict; Havel (1994, September 29) has compared this “to life in a prison cell, in which the inmates get on each other’s nerves far more than if they saw each other only occasionally.”

Learning organizations understand conflict as inevitable, and not necessarily bad. “Interactionists” believe organizational conflict is natural, a neutral phenomenon that can have beneficial or harmful results. Some scholars, however, distinguish between “cognitive” and “affective” (emotional) conflict, seeing the first as potentially useful and the second as always damaging.

Learning organizations understand conflict as beneficial if properly handled and dangerous if ignored. When well-managed, they say, conflict can effect better outcomes; the more points of view that emerge, the more good options an organization has to choose among. But left alone or badly handled, conflict can explode. And efforts to invigorate positive conflict run the risk of stimulating negative conflict; unfortunately, it is sometimes hard to tell where the danger point is.

Learning-organization theorists believe successful handling of conflict requires a new style of management. Conflict management means “both resolving conflict and stimulating it” (Faerman, 1996, p. 641). And good leaders will not squelch opposing perspectives, but help them to emerge.

Leadership and Shared Meaning

[It] is a wrongheaded notion which assumes that the citizen is a fool and that political success depends on playing to this folly. (Havel, June 8, 1995)

Leaders. . . must be the chief missionary, ever traveling, ever talking, ever listening. . . one long teach-in. (Handy, 1994, p. 122)

Good leaders with a new leadership style are at the forefront of learning organizations and civil societies. They are people who see their task not so much as problem-solving but as creating whole new ways of doing business, people whose authority comes less from a role than from a way of

interacting with others, people who spend more of their time communicating than “doing.” I will use the phrase “authentic leaders” to describe such individuals.

Essentially, such authentic leaders are people who help move their organizations toward shared meaning. Shared meaning grounds a civil society or a learning organization and gives it the capacity for growth and flexibility, for taking on hard problems. In many ways, the meaning that groups reach is less important than the journey they take in search of meaning.

This section explores the ways that civil societies and learning organizations understand leadership, shared meaning and the relationship between the two.

Leadership

Leaders bear a special responsibility for the learning organization and the civil society. In Havel’s words (1995, June 8): “The world is in the hands of us all. And yet some have a greater influence on its fate than others.” I have identified eight ways in which he and organization theorists see the role of leaders similarly:

Authentic leaders inspire their organizations or their societies to reach high. “[P]olitics can be not simply the art of the possible,” Havel (1990, January 1) told his nation two months after Communism fell, “but [also] the art of the impossible, that is, the art of improving ourselves and the world.” And learning-organization proponents often quote

Common Cause founder John Gardner, who says leaders “can conceive and articulate goals that lift people out of their petty preoccupations, carry them above the conflicts that tear a society apart, and unite them in pursuit of objectives worthy of their best efforts” (Bennis, 1989, p. 13).

Authentic leaders may exist anywhere within -- or outside of -- the power structure. Conversely, people with official power may fail at leadership, even if they fulfill the technical requirements of their jobs. Bureaucrats frequently rouse particular scorn, from organizational scholars and social critics alike. (3) When official power breaks down, informal leaders often emerge. Thus, Havel (1990, p. 123) began writing his “Open Letters” to Communist leaders because, “I had stopped waiting for the world to improve and exercised my right to intervene in that world or at least to express my opinion about it.”

Authentic leaders are more interested in serving than in power. Effective leaders “may live in the center but they must not be the center”

(Handy, 1994, p. 121). Learning-organization literature refers to them as stewards, servants and “designers, not captains” (Nevis *et al*, 1996, p. 271). And Havel (1992, p. 6) says that “genuine politics. . . is simply a matter of serving those around us: serving the community, and serving those who will come after us.” In one address, he called this “morality in practice” (1995, June 8).

Authentic leaders follow their own inner visions, and give voice to those visions, but they also are rigorous self-critics. The actions of a “post-modern politician,” Havel (1992, October 27) says, “cannot derive from impersonal analysis; they must come out of a personal point of view, which cannot be based on a sense of superiority but must spring from humility.” Such leaders communicate their vision so compellingly that it can take root throughout the organization; but they also are able to let others modify that vision or suggest one of their own. Thus, the best leaders blend “self-confidence with reasonable doubt, a skepticism that starts the questioning that turns the wheel” (Handy, 1995, p. 49). Havel (1991, May 28) calls for political leaders to be vigilant in defying the “treacherous, delusive, and ambiguous. . . temptation of power.”

Authentic leaders help awaken the best in people, often by sharing power. “What is needed is the unleader, the person who builds capacity in others” (Carnevale, 1995, p. 56). Such leaders believe in people: Just as politicians choose “whether they rely on the good in each citizen or on the bad” (Havel, 1992, p. 4), business leaders are most effective when they trust their followers and unleash them to do their best. This is both moral and pragmatic: In contemporary organizations, much power is decentralized and people “will only follow leaders who take them where they want to go” (O’Toole, 1995, p. 124).

Heroic and charismatic leaders are not always in the best interest of a group. (4) Charisma and individualism at the top do not necessarily produce strength throughout an organization; people may learn to wait passively for someone “in charge” to act. Havel (1992, October 27) compared life in Communist times to the Samuel Beckett play *Waiting for Godot*: “Because [people] did not carry hope within them, they expected it to arrive as some kind of salvation from without. . . . a meaningless form of self-deception and therefore a waste of time.” Furthermore, the heroic leader often is effective *only* in emergencies: Many such leaders “deal in visions and crises, and little in between. . . [U]nder their leadership, an organization caroms from crisis to crisis” (Senge, 1990, p. 355). This does not produce a resilient organization: “[I]f problems were the only triggers of learning,

problem-ridden organizations would be the best innovators” (Hedberg, 1981, p. 17).

Authentic leaders -- in civil society or the learning organization -- are transformational. Burns (1978, p. 4) coined the term “transforming leader” to mean someone who “seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower. The result. . . is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents.” Such leaders do not control followers, but inspire them with a vision that includes their own finest dreams. Workers or citizens then transcend narrow self-interest and become concerned with the good of the organization or the community. In this way, the individual “finds its primary, most natural, and most universal expression” (Havel, 1992, p. 31).

Ultimately, authentic leadership is spread throughout a learning organization or civil society. Our most critical problems “will require an integrated assault,” according to Donald F. Kettl (1994, p. 21). “These structures should naturally arise from below as a consequence of authentic social self-organization,” Havel (1991, p. 211) says. They will develop “leadership of and for the whole” (Tucker, 1995, p. 129), and blur distinctions between leaders and followers. Such enterprises will have a radically human dimension; “people [will] be able to work in them as people, as beings with a soul and a sense of responsibility, not as robots” (Havel, 1990, p. 15). Thus, “something [will be] born that might be called the ‘independent spiritual, social, and political life of society’” (Havel, 1991, p. 176).

Shared Meaning

When such unity occurs, often it is because of shared meaning, “the glue or cement that holds people and societies together” (Bohm, 1996, p. 6). Havel and learning-organization experts alike believe the world urgently needs to renew such understandings. “If the future of mankind is not to be jeopardized by conflicting spheres of civilization and culture, we have no alternative but to shift the ray of our attention from that which separates us to that which unites us,” Havel (1995, October 24) told the United Nations. And when Bennis said “a nation. . . can’t progress without a common vision” (1989, p. 20), he might have said the same thing for the private sector.

Here are the five key points that Havel and learning-organization materials both emphasize about shared meaning;

In many ways, shared meaning is in crisis. One clue if shared meaning exists is whether a group acts as a system or is fractious.

Fragmentation might reflect a disparity between “espoused theories” and “theories-in-use,” or between individual and broader interests. Havel (1990, February 21) told Congress that “[i]nterests of all kinds: personal, selfish, state, national, group and. . . company interests still considerably outweigh genuinely common and global interests.

But shared meaning is possible. People have intimations of it. “[A]ny genuine meaningful point of departure in an individual’s life usually has an element of universality. . . [I]t is not something partial, accessible only to a restricted community. . . . One the contrary, it must be potentially accessible to everyone. . . .” (Havel, 1991, p. 194). Groups may experience it as “social covenants” (Emery and Purser, 1996). But when shared meaning loses its vitality and becomes inadequate, stagnant or stifling, it is no longer useful and the covenant must be changed.

Shared meaning is born, shaped and kept alive through open and honest communication. “Conversation is what the team learning discipline is all about,” Senge told an interviewer (Galagan, October 1991, p. 38). It may begin with transformational leaders, but genuine shared vision must come from the whole. To be effective, such communication may “raise the undiscussable” (Schwarz, 1994, p. 81) or work to replace espoused theories with theories in use. In any case, “[g]ood communication is an ethical question” (O’Toole, 1995, p. 44). At its best, it can be a form of what Havel calls “living in truth.”

True shared meaning is not sheerly rational or technical. This is a favorite theme of Havel’s prison letters (1988), which argue that, when we persist in an overly rational worldview, we risk becoming alienated from our communities. “Knowledge and convictions. . . do not come from detached observation alone, but from lively involvement and inner experience as well. . . [S]hared meaning is possible only when people “can speak from the heart about what really matters to them and be heard” (Senge *et al*, 1994, p. 299).

Shared meaning cannot be imposed, from above or by the group. It is neither the “ideological straitjacket” that Havel (1992, p. 128) recalls from Communist days, nor the conformist “groupthink.” Shared meaning is what groups -- working together -- discover to be right for them at a particular time.

Rethinking “Technique”

*Will we be a genuinely civic, genuinely open society
that will enable all people to influence its affairs
on multiple levels and in a host of ways. . . [o]r*

will our social system slowly, imperceptibly and irreversibly become so self-contained that ultimately the most crucial matters will always be decided by the same, closely-knit brotherhood. . . ? (Havel, January 1, 2002)

Failures in fundamental change efforts are the norm rather than the exception. Why? (Senge, 2002, p. 4)

Neither the learning organization nor the civil society is merely an ideal. They may never be fully realized, but both Havel and learning-organization proponents call for businesses and societies to move toward their visions with all deliberate speed.

How does a group, an organization or a society make concrete steps toward shared meaning? Havel expresses few ideas here. (5) Learning-organization literature, on the other hand, is full of ideas for transforming businesses; ideas that have been frequently tested, and attested for, by corporations; ideas that resonate with Havel's basic notions of what makes a society civil.

An earlier version of this paper, presented at the 1997 Academy of Management meeting (Palmer, 1997), sought concrete techniques to help government move toward the civil society. So-called "hot groups" and search conferences were identified as practical tools well suited to a world of conflict and change. Scenario planning also has been tried successfully by both public and private sectors. (6)

Success stories in such activities have much in common. They flourish amid environments of change and conflict; they emerge because of leadership that dared to be authentic; they rely on teamwork; and they succeed by building shared meaning across history and boundaries. But encouraging examples are not commonplace. Often, even success stories celebrate only limited-time processes and short-term results.

Senge the practitioner has identified nine shortcomings of change efforts that are echoed in Havel's writings:

Change efforts fail because organizations and societies fail to invest the necessary time. "[It] takes months and years, not hours," Senge (2002, p. 4) says. "It takes deep commitment; it takes a willingness and a possibility to practice, to try out new approaches repeatedly, and to learn from experience. That's the way we learn anything that's significant." In his last New Year's address as President, Havel (2003, January 1) urged his countrymen not to consider the work of democratization complete: "[O]ur

work is not over. We must remind ourselves over and over that democracy is not just a certain institutional structure, but also a spirit, a human capacity, a purpose, and an ideal. The structure exists to serve these.”

They fail because priorities are given too little attention. Senge (1996, p. 5) reports that he “often find[s] a huge disconnect between what executives say is important and what they spend their time doing.” Havel is relentless on a similar theme, returning to it months after leaving office: “Humanity’s ability to brave the dangers that confront it today hinges. . . on the degree to which we accept responsibility for ourselves and the world” (2004),

Attempts at change fail because we focus on external circumstances rather than internal conditions. “The real territory of change is always ‘in here,’” according to Senge (2002, p. 5). “Now, the consequences must be ‘out there’ if we’re really interested in institutional change. But we can’t get there from just focusing on ‘out there.’” Havel put it this way: “[E]veryone ought to be able to judge his or her own capacity and act accordingly, expecting that one’s strength will grow with the new tasks one sets oneself or that it will run out. . . There is no more relying on fairy tales and fairy-tale heroes” (2002, September 20).

Change efforts fail because we minimize issues or hide behind their complexity. “Most of the time, people in positions of authority trivialize complex issues,” Senge (2002, p. 6) has said, charging this is especially true of public sector leaders. Havel (2004) says that blaming complexity or blaming somehow-inevitable forces is “simply a red herring that turns them into substitute culprits whose indictment relieves us of taking responsibility for our own lives[.]” In either case, the result is inaction, almost paralysis.

They fail because we overemphasize competition. “There is nothing intrinsically wrong with competition,” Senge (undated) says, but it has become “our only model for change and learning.” This blocks us from seeing situations in their entirety; interferes with our abilities to cooperate and collaborate; and keeps our focus on short-term results. Havel (2002, April 4) warns that competition leads to feelings of superiority, defensiveness, even imperialism. Paradoxically, cooperation is possible only when “individual entities succeed in defining themselves -- which requires, among other things, an understanding of where they begin and end. Many conflicts have been caused by insecure self-identification. . .” (Havel, 2002, May 19).

Attempts at change fail because we misunderstand teamwork. Teams have become a preferred way of doing business, in government and industry. The highly regarded Robert K. Greenleaf (1991, p. 67) claimed that “[I]f a

group is confronted by the right questions long enough, they will see through to the essence and find the right way.” Ideally, teams combine experience with innovation; by blending representatives from different parts of an organization or society, they are thought to produce more broadly credible results that can be implemented more readily. Teamwork is at the heart of hot groups, search conferences and scenario planning. But Senge (1996,1998, p. 7) has begun to doubt the general effectiveness of team theory: “Many. . . are essentially individualistic in nature.” He finds greater creativity, flexibility and responsiveness in the alignment of jazz ensembles or basketball teams. And Havel (2002, April 9) has a ready warning against losing oneself in a team: “[M]any of those who were unable to come to terms with their own responsibility. . . have wanted to merge into a pack and hide under the banner of collectivism.”

They fail because we often put the wrong kind of people into leadership roles. Senge (undated, p. 7) claims that “[t]he learning capabilities of teams tend to deteriorate steadily the higher you go up the corporate ladder. . . Why? The precondition for building a team is that people perceive themselves as needing one another. And a lot of senior executives don’t perceive this. . . .” The ever self-reflective Havel (2002, September 20) said that a dozen years in office had left him “a good deal less sure of myself, a good deal more humble. . . . [T]he very same spiritual and intellectual unease that once compelled me to stand up against the totalitarian regime and go to jail for it is now causing me to have such deep doubts about the value of my own work.” Such humility is exactly what Senge (2002, p.10) sees as the foundation for true change: “Only if we are in that shadow of doubt will we have a chance of actually hearing what *another* says that doesn’t match what *we* say. Only if we are in the shadow of doubt do we have a chance to learn.” Thus, he says, we need leaders who clarify rather than exhort.

And change efforts fail because we treat organizations as though they are static, and then continue to recreate them, problems and all. Institutions are living systems and should continually renew themselves, according to Senge (2004). As long as our understanding of them is outdated, we will continue “changing only in reaction to outside forces, yet the well-spring of real learning is aspiration, imagination, and experimentation” (Senge, undated, p. 3). Havel (2002, April 9) reflects this caution for the public sector: “[H]ow important it is that law should not be some kind of an end in itself. . . and then followed in a blind, or even callous, fashion. . . . It is the purpose of law. . . that should be sacred.”

Perhaps most critically: *Change efforts fail because businesses and governments think the goal is problem-solving, when it should be creativity.* “The problem solver tries to make something go away. A creator tries to bring something new into being,” according to Senge (undated) -- a sentiment echoing Havel’s notion that “politics can be not only the art of the possible. . . it can even be the art of the impossible.”

The dilemmas that confront an increasingly globalized 21st Century (7) often lead us to seek quick, apparent answers. “[W]e live in truly bizarre times,” Senge (2001, p. 6) counsels. “We have this hubris, this sense that anything we want to make happen, we can make happen. . . . [W]e simultaneously live with an extraordinary experience of powerlessness.” According to Havel (2002, September 20), this places the world “at perhaps the most important crossroads of history.” We may have no choice in taking the new road, Senge (2004, p. 9) says: Our institutions, their leadership and the thinking that underpins them “are falling apart.”

Faith and Hope

Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. . . It is also hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually try new things. . . (Havel, 1990, pp. 181-182)

Most people want to share in a task that is bigger than themselves. They want a purpose in life beyond themselves, one which is real versus a thing of rhetoric. (Handy, 1995, p. 54)

At the same time that the world we have known is eroding, visions of a civil society and a learning organization are grounded in powerful emotion that can only be called hope. Havel and learning-organization proponents like Senge share four common understandings which inform those visions and give them a tremendous staying power, a power that only hope can sustain.

Their hope is rooted in a belief that human beings have the potential to change. A learning organization is a group of people “continually enhancing their capacity to create what they want to create” (Galagan,

October 1991, p. 42). But new forms of organization are possible only with “radical changes in human thinking and behavior, and in social consciousness,” Havel told the Council of Europe (1990, May 10). Though he warned that transformation will not be easy, his remarks indicate he believes people are capable of deep change: “[W]e must not be afraid of dreaming the seemingly impossible if we want the seemingly impossible to become a reality.”

Their hope is founded on a conviction that humans feel responsibility for themselves and toward one another. Society must nurture this sense of responsibility, Havel (1990, p. 199) says, rather than giving people “the feeling that these heroes will take things for them. . . [E]ach of us must find real, fundamental hope within himself. You can’t delegate that to anyone else.” In fact, people want to exercise their responsibility: Robert Bellah and his colleagues found support for institutions declining in part because “they do not challenge us to use all of our capacities so we have a sense of enjoyable achievement and of contributing to the welfare of others” (1992, p. 49).

They understand the importance of dreams to keep hope alive. Havel (1990, May 10) calls this “dreaming as a matter of principle,” and says it “is never pointless to think about alternatives that may at the moment seem improbably, impossible, or simply fantastic.” Such musings also are the stuff of the visions that power learning organizations.

And their hope understands it must be patient. Transformation is “a change process that unfolds over many years,” say the authors of the aptly named *Intentional Revolutions* (Nevis *et al.*, 1996, pp. 132-133). To Havel:

[h]ope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. (1990, p. 181)

Such is the hope -- the faith -- that fuels the vision of a civil society or a learning organization.

Putting Dreams to Work

[T]he moral order derives from the transcendental

order; the civic order derives from the moral order; and only then does the civic order give rise to the political order. (Havel, 2002, September 19)

[W]e're at the beginning of something, not the end.
(Senge, in The Drucker Foundation, 2001, p. 40)

The most impressive contribution that Havel, Senge and some other learning-organization proponents have made to the effort of transforming the world may be their unworldliness. References to metaphysics, the unseen, transcendence and religion -- even love -- recur throughout their writing.

While emphasizing self-reflection, they embrace a world of blurred boundaries. “[H]ome has no distinct and explicit borders, nor does it have any absolute beginning or absolute end,” Havel (2002, October 28) said in an address on one Czech National Day. “Home consists of multiple layers and its perception always depends primarily on our point of view or on the scale that we apply.” Senge (2004, p. 12) calls for a shift of awareness so “the normal boundaries between self and world dissolve.”

The shift is “from seeing a world made up of things to seeing a world that’s open and primarily made up of relationships.” It requires surrender from doing into being. (Senge, 1996, 1998, pp. 10-12).

Such surrender requires “flexibility, patience, and acute awareness,” according to Joseph Jaworski (1996, 1998, p. 88). When we achieve this, we lose ourselves into something that psychologist Carl Jung called “synchronicity. . . a meaningful coincidence of two or more events, where something other than the probability of chance is involved.” Jaworski describes the experience of a life in synchronicity:

The people who come to you are the very people you need in relation to your commitment. Doors open, a sense of flow develops, and you find you are acting in a coherent field of people who may not even be aware of one another. You are not acting individually any longer, but out of the unfolding generative order. This is the unbroken wholeness of the implicate order out of which seemingly discrete events take place. At this point, your life becomes a series of predictable miracles.
(Jaworski, 1996, 1998, p. 185)

A related experience is that of “presence,” something described in a new book of that name (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers, 2004) that was released as this article was heading to press. Those authors say:

We’ve come to believe that the core capacity needed for accessing the field of the future is presence. We first thought of presence as being fully conscious and aware in the present moment. Then we began to experience presence as deep listening, of being open beyond one’s preconceptions and historical ways of making sense. We came to see the importance of letting go of old identities and the need to control. . . Ultimately, we came to see all of these aspects of presence as leading to a state of ‘letting come,’ of consciously participating in a larger field for change. (Senge *et al*, 2004, p. 11)

The visions of Havel, Jaworski and Senge call us to understand that “[a] deeper level of reality exists beyond anything we can articulate” (Senge, 1996, 1998, p. 10). At the same time, we may approach that reality, that synchronicity, that presence through the practice of dialogue.

Dialogue

[T]his joint participation in an unusual journey, this collective uncertainty about where a journey is leading, this delight in discovering it together and finding the courage and the ability to negotiate and enjoy the new vistas together -- it is all this that creates a remarkable and rare sense of community. . .
(Havel, 1988, p. 253)

Dialogue is not intended for “practical” purposes. It functions solely for the development of deep shared meaning. Yet this exercise has a profound potential for moving us toward the civil society.

Dialogue is “a way of exploring the roots of the many crises that face humanity today. . . a continuing adventure that can open the way to significant and creative change” (Bohm, Factor and Garrett, 1991) and the path to “a participatory consciousness” (Bohm, 1996, p. 26).

Of all learning-organization activities, dialogue is perhaps the most Havelian. (8) While playwrights may be expected to have a keen interest in theatrical dialogue, Havel (1988, p. 253) also has written extensively about dialogue as a civic practice: “communal participation in the ‘order of the spirit’.”

His ideas are strikingly similar to those of David Bohm, the late physicist who mixed a quantum view of the world -- in which relationships are everything and parts, as opposed to wholes, exist only in the human mind -- with the ancient tradition of discussions in a circle, to produce the modern system known as dialogue.

Both Havel and Bohm believe that humans realized themselves only in deep connection with others. “[I]t is only through a ‘you’. . . , only through a ‘we,’ that the ‘I’ can genuinely become itself,” Havel (1988, p. 370) has written. And Bohm called dialogue “a sort of collective dance of the mind that. . . has immense power and reveals coherent purpose” (Bohm *et al*, 1991).

Both men are concerned with the experience of separation so common to human beings. Havel (1988, p. 351) expresses this in lofty fashion: “[O]ne’s separated being. . . precisely because of its separation, aspires toward the integrity of Being.” Bohm made his case more plainly, arguing that human behavior and thought are collective, though people mistakenly believe them to be fragmented. This error causes us to see ourselves as separate -- even isolated -- individuals, rather than as part of an unbroken whole of society.

Havel and Bohm also both see breakdowns in thought and language as the primary reason for such alienation. Havel (1991, p. 13) warns that “the more we know only what is apparent about reality, the less we know about reality in fact.” Bohm agrees that thought and its medium, language, are incoherent and riddled with errors. Four that he considers most dangerous are outlined below, with comparison to Havel’s kindred but less systematic observations about language and thought.

Thought is full of tacit assumptions. In larger society, such assumptions constitute the culture. “Until thought is understood -- better yet, more than understood, *perceived* -- it will actually control us; but it will create the impression that it is our servant, that it is just doing what we want it to do” (Bohm, 1992, p. 5). Similarly, Havel warned about “conventionalized, pseudo-ideological thinking that has become so dangerously domesticated” (1991, p. 111)

Thought and language cannot capture the full essence of any thing they attempt to understand or describe. “[T]he thing is always more than

what we mean and is never exhausted by our concepts” (Bohm and Peat, 1987, p. 8). Thus, according to Havel (1988, p. 258), effectiveness requires “penetrating to ever higher levels of articulation.”

Thought presents itself as external, objective reality when, instead, it is brought forth subjectively. “Thought creates the world and then says, ‘I didn’t do it,’” Bohm said (Kofman and Senge, p. 12). In this way, opinions seem factual. And to Havel (1991, p. 136), “individuals confirm the system, fulfill the system, make the system, *are* the system.”

Because we confuse thought (which is really memory or learned response) with thinking, most of us never learn the act of thinking. So Havel (1991, p. 11) has blamed “ritualized” and “degraded” language for splitting thought from reality “and thus cripp[ing] its capacity to intervene in that reality effectively,” and Bohm used an environmental metaphor:

If collective thinking is an ongoing stream,
‘thoughts’ are like leaves floating on the surface
that wash up on the banks. We gather in the
leaves, which we experience as ‘thoughts.’ We
misperceive the thoughts as our own, because we fail
to see the stream of collective thinking from
which they arise. (Senge, 1990, p. 242)

To correct defective thought and human separation, Bohm (Senge, 1990, p. 242) called for dialogue, saying it helps people begin to see “the stream that flows between the banks.” He and several of his disciples developed a variety of guidelines for conducting the process. (9) They seem consistent with Havel’s views, though he is silent on discrete processes.

One important condition is that -- initially -- there should be a facilitator. The facilitator’s role is key as people learn to “suspend their assumptions” (that is, to put them forward for observation, reflection and understanding by everyone in the group) and “listen generatively,” for meaning, not just words. But because dialogue emphasizes the equality of participants, the group should be moving toward eventual collective leadership.

Guidelines for group size vary. Bohm said that fewer than 20 people is too small for the necessary confrontation and more than 40 too large for the necessary intimacy. His ideal seems to be the number of people who can participate fully in a single circle (Bohm, 1996). In the circle, participants should “speak to the center, not to each other” (Isaacs and Smith, 1994, p. 380). (10)

Because early attempts at dialogue can be frustrating, it is suggested that the group meet at least three times before deciding whether to disband. When dialogue works, it will be unmistakable, according to Joseph Jaworski (1996,1998, p. 112): “When it’s present, you know it. You can’t fake dialogue. Yet when you focus on it too hard and try to capture the process, you change it, and it collapses and vanishes.”

Weekly meetings of 90-120 minutes are recommended. Dialogue will have its own timetable, as Bohm said of one meeting that “went on, until it finally seemed to stop for no reason at all and the group dispersed” (Jaworski, 1996, 1998, p. 109).

While there is disagreement over whether dialogue is suited for business or government, the key seems to be in Bohm’s caution (1996, p. 42) that “[t]here is no place in the dialogue for authority and hierarchy.” Nor is there a place for an agenda. “[We] are not going to decide what to do about anything. This is crucial. Otherwise we are not free” (Bohm, 1996, p. 17). “Our purpose is really to communicate coherently in truth, if you want to call that a purpose.”

The group should not, probably even can not, begin with larger issues. Yet practitioners say topics ultimately can include class, race, politics, economics, current affairs and religion. Whatever the topic, dialogue is not likely to be linear, “contradictions live happily side by side” (DeMare, Piper and Thompson, 1991, p. 146); and it often is frustrating because, as people learn to suspend assumptions, anger and fear are likely to arise. But dialogue can become exciting, as it develops what Havel (1988, p. 256) calls “an electrifying atmosphere of community.”

If people persist in dialogue, they are likely to find a sense of shared purpose emerging. The experience of dialogue somehow teaches people how to work together by seeing themselves as a collective whole. In Bohm’s words:

People can begin to move into coordinated patterns of action, without the artificial, tedious process of decision making. They can start to act in an aligned way. They do not need to work out an action plan for what everyone should do. . . Each member of the team simply knows what he or she is ‘supposed’ to do (or, rather, what’s best to do), because they all fit into a larger whole. (Isaacs, 1994, p. 358)

The understanding of wholeness represents “a deep shift in consciousness away from the notion that the parts are primary,” Jaworski (1996,1998, p. 116) says. “[T]he whole already already exists; it’s just that we’re locked into a frame of reference that keeps us from perceiving it. In dialogue, the whole shows up and is manifested by individuals as they take action.”

That larger whole may be a new kind of citizenship, what Bohm (1996, p. 320 has called “impersonal fellowship” and some practitioners term *koinonia* (a term from ancient Greek usage, meaning communion or fellowship). “It is citizenship in the making,” *koinonia* theorists say. “[G]iven time and opportunity for dialogue to develop, without goal or task or personal leadership, a culture does in due course evolve which is democratically highly responsible” (De Mare *et al*, 1991, pp. 92 and 175).

Havel (1988, pp. 370-371), too, sees dialogue unleashing a deep sense of responsibility among people. This does not emerge from “new ideas, projects, programs and organizations,” but “only in a renaissance of elementary human relationships.” In this way, dialogue -- with its creation of deep shared meaning -- lies at the heart of his hopes for a civil society.

Conclusion

Skeptics may argue that these are soft and unproven approach to governing, and that it is a risky thing to mix dreams. But using learning-organization lessons in pursuit of Havel’s vision offers a powerful new orientation for public-sector leaders today.

It may not be the only method a government executive employs; certainly such leaders (like corporate executives) also must spend a great amount of time in transactional activities. And it may be harder for a government executive, with a fully public constituency and public mandates to consider, than it is for a business leader to move single-mindedly toward a learning model.

Yet government leaders also have certain advantages over their private-sector counterparts in the development of shared meaning. The public expects government not just to deliver goods and services, but to try for something more, something uplifting, that will improve individual and community life. Campaigns as well as governance give candidates and citizens a chance to go beyond spin-doctoring to weave a common vision of how members of society should live together. And government leaders can tap into a rich tradition of evocative public rhetoric that is unlike anything available to corporate executives.

The current crisis in confidence adds one more reason why government executives should move in this direction. Voters -- and non-voters -- often say they don't feel heard and understood by politicians or bureaucrats; at the same time, many of our most pressing societal problems are not addressed because politicians say they can't muster public backing.

Breakdowns in policy and process seem so disturbing not merely because today's world seems such a high-stakes gamble, but because they are at odds with a basic underpinning of American government: what political scientists James G. March and Johan P. Olsen (1995, p. 251) have called "democratic governance as faith." We live within a social compact and have been schooled with civics lessons that often make us, like Havel, believers in the civil society.

Government executives can tap these deep emotions by freeing their own Havelian sentiments and balancing them with techniques from learning organizations. For practical and political reasons, perhaps governments should not follow a learning model exclusively. But elected and appointed executives alike can incorporate learning-organization practices to give their own priority programs a creative edge, broader support and staying power. And they can begin, without fanfare, dialogues -- perhaps starting with their own leadership circles -- to go beyond the issues of the moment to the concerns and faith that sustain us as a democratic society.

Endnotes

1. Among them, Bellah *et al*, 1992; Morgan, 1986; and Useem and Kochan, 1992.
2. For purposes of this paper, "conflict" is not generally understood to include armed conflict. Havel has spoken out about terrorism, totalitarianism, nationalism and various armed conflicts; he also vigorously pursued Czech membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but those issues will not be addressed here. And while the world conditions that produce armed conflict may be ameliorated by applications described in this paper, Havel (2002, September 20) does not rule out the use of military power by enlightened countries: "Evil must be confronted in its womb and, if there is no other way to do it, then it has to be dealt with by the use of force." Obviously, this is a technique that goes beyond any of regular learning organizations.
3. Several scholars separate managers and leaders with the distinction between doing things right and doing the right thing. "[The] problem in many public organizations is that they are overmanaged and underled" (Carnevale, 1995, p. 57). The implication is not that management is unnecessary. Bennis (1989, p. 103) says a CEO must combine "administrative and imaginative gifts." Bryson and Crosby (1992, p. 43) argue that "leaders must be good managers or at least associate themselves with good managers." And Havel, no fan of "the apparatchik" (1991, p. 257) says "a politician must also be a good executive officer, surrounding himself with efficient people and delegating responsibility" (1992, April 23).
4. In his landmark work Leadership, Burns (1978,244) uses the term "heroic leadership" to mean: "belief in leaders because of their personage alone. . . ; faith in the

leaders' capacity to overcome obstacles and crises; readiness to grant to leaders the powers to handle crises; mass support for such leaders. . . . [I]t is a *type of relationship* between leader and led. A crucial aspect of this relationship is the absence of conflict. . . . Heroic leadership provides the *symbolic* solution of internal and external conflict.

5. In a number of speeches, however, Havel is most concrete about necessary action when he argues strongly for multinational organizations like European union or a stronger United Nations, to underpin individual civil societies.

6. This paper will not examine these approaches, but readers may find more information about hot groups in Leavitt and Lipman-Blumen, 1995 and in Kearney, 1987; about search conferences in Weisbord, 1992 and in Emery and Purser, 1996; and about scenario planning in Kleiner, 1995 and in Jaworski, 1996 and 1998.

7. Havel and Senge both have identified similar problems in the global society: environmental destruction; the gulf between rich and poor; materialism; nationalism, terrorism, fanaticism; the undermining of family and cultural ties. They each helped established a think tank to address them. Havel was a co-founder of the annual Forum series, and Senge is a founder of the Society for Organizational Learning.

8. This may be because dialogue is the least "practical" and the most abstract and philosophical.

9. However, "[n]o firm rules can be laid down. . . because [dialogue's] essence is learning" (Bohm *et al*, 1991).

10. One author suggests: "In dialogue, speak from the heart and the moment and from your own experience; listen from the community, the collective. Listen without thinking about responding. Listen for information, not confirmation (Brown, 1995, p. 158).

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