

# The Generative Spiral of Profound Change

During the past 35 years there has been a growing recognition that organizations, like all living systems, cannot be changed by directive or fiat. They change when “a small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens,” as Margaret Mead famously put it, sets out to make a difference. In so doing, they not only cultivate the capacity of the whole system around them, but transform themselves as well. The generative spiral model in this paper is a map of how that process works.

This generative spiral process can be observed, in some form, whenever social systems change for the better. We have mapped it in the evolution of such diverse social and organizational change movements as the Civil Rights movement in the United States; the evolution of the WorkOut process at General Electric; the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in the late 1980s; the movement out of apartheid in South Africa; the evolution of BP’s learning and development initiatives; the maturation of the International Finance Corporation, the private sector development arm of the World Bank; and change movements in dozens of organizations, ranging from small businesses to school systems to non-profits to government agencies to large corporations. We have come to rely on the spiral model over other models of change because it is actionable; it is specific enough to serve as a guide to practice, and general enough to apply to a wide variety of circumstances. Most importantly, it resonates with the experience that people already have of change in their own lives and organizations.

## From Fragmentation to Wholeness

David Bohm, a preeminent quantum physicist, shifted focus in the later years of his life to human consciousness and society. In so doing, he noticed the prevalence of “fragmentation” –the loss of awareness of the whole as people and groups become caught up in the parts. Marketing competes with production for

## Sources

Conceived by William Isaacs in 1997, the spiral model is the result of 20 years of research and practice in large-scale organizational change: First with a series of dialogue groups convened by physicist David Bohm in the 1980’s in London, then at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Center for Organizational Learning in the early 1990s, and at the Circle Institute and its for-profit partner, Dialogos. Over the years, Isaacs and his associates have refined and developed the model, drawing upon a variety of sources and examples, including:

1. In-depth consultative work at a variety of corporations and large organizations, including BP (HBR articles), the Ford Motor Company (Car Launch; Fifth Discipline Fieldbook), GS Technologies (Dialogue and AOTT), the World Bank Group, Motorola, Sprint, and Royal Bank of Scotland;
2. Research into the history of social movements, including the American Civil Rights movement in the 1950s, and the movement in South Africa which ultimately led to the end of apartheid in that country;
3. Studies of political intervention, including the work of the Peruvian Institute for Learning and Democracy (led by economist Hernando de Soto, *Mystery of Capital*; The Philosopher of Freedom (Kleiner);
4. Research into classic cases of organizational change and intervention, including socio-technical experiments at General Foods and Procter and Gamble in the 1970s and 1980s (Kleiner, *Age of Heretics*); the quality movement in the 1980s and 1990s (Andrea Gabor: *The Man Who Invented Quality*); and General Electric’s “WorkOut” efforts in the late 1980s and early 1990s (GE’s Next WorkOut);
5. On-the-ground consultation with smaller organizations, including school systems, philanthropic foundations, and non-profit organizations (Stepping Stones);
6. Theoretical studies by leading scholars of organizational and social change, including David Kantor (Fieldbook pieces; Dialogue), Chris Argyris, Edgar Schein (Process Consultation), Peter Senge (Fifth Discipline), Jennifer Kemeny, and Donella Meadows;
7. In the literature of social change, including some of the deepest cultural and religious myths that touch on the natural evolution in social systems (the Genesis and Exodus stories and the King Arthur legends (Diana Durham), for example);
8. An ongoing series of model-building workshops at Dialogos, in which a number of past and present associates have played significant roles.

resources and the two blame one another for supply shortages. A union and management conflict escalates to the point where employees and families on both sides of the line suffer unnecessarily. A minority community is systematically excluded from the power structure and opportunities for development. Such fragmentation lies not only in the formal structures of an organization, but in the habitual patterns of collective thought. These patterns act with almost hypnotic control, presenting the appearance that they are absolutely necessary, unchangeable. Yet our work has provided strong evidence to suggest this is not the case.

Conventional change management often doesn't work precisely because it echoes the *fragmentation* of the larger systems around it. This is because the change required is defined as typically outside of the change agents, whoever they may be, who then "apply" leverage to various parts of the organization. It is well known that leaders who come in with a lofty idea and try to mandate it from the top, invite compliance, but not commitment. At Harley Davidson such efforts became known as an "AFP" – "another fine program." Managers see limits in their organization and apply pressure; consultants try to advise, grass roots leaders try to organize others.

Because of this many change efforts simply either fail or lead to lower performance. Nelson Repenning and John Sterman at MIT document in their research the ways TQM, lean performance and reengineering efforts failed to work, in fact lowering, in some cases, overall performance even as it improved a few local production processes.

Beneath this fragmentation, however, is something else, In every living system, individual or collective, there is an underlying core rhythm, a deeper potential, that is alive and healthy. In individuals it is the reason there is the possibility of health. In organizations, if people would see it, there is always a deeper possibility waiting to emerge. Tapping into this is what allows creative change to occur. However, organizations usually have too much static, too much fragmentation, to be able hear or reveal accurately this underlying order and creative promise. Our interest is in identifying a way to allow this potential to unfold. We have found that it one only gets traction in those cases where the leaders embrace this thinking, where they are themselves deeply engaged, and where they work to become aware of

## Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why should I care about a long-term approach like the spiral model, when I have to focus on short-term targets to survive?

A: First, how much effort and energy does it take right now to meet those targets? Are you doing it steadily, consistently, and confidently, in a way that shows you are learning more about meeting that target every quarter? Or does it require accelerating levels of effort? Would it not make sense to invest some time in the kind of long-term change that can make it far easier to produce short-term results?

There is also good research evidence now to suggest that concentrated effort on short term tactical issues actually contributes to the long, slow deterioration of deeper capacity – the point where in some cases it is never recoverable ( Sterman, Repenning, *CMR*)

Second, in our experience, most leaders – even in the most hard-nosed businesses – have a purpose in mind beyond simply meeting short-term targets. They want to create wealth, or build an enterprise, to leave a legacy; a few want to make a difference in some socially or environmentally responsible way. Some have the fire of invention behind them. Some are drawn by a sense of alignment with others around them; and others by a vision or calling with deep personal roots. Whatever the source may be, it generally doesn't start or end with simply making money; "a goal of reaching a \$500 million target," said one executive, "doesn't energize people."

Third, spiral model-style initiatives have intrinsic value – as a way to more deeply understand the organization and your place in it. When leaders are attuned in this way, they act differently. They see the forces moving around them more clearly. They recognize more clearly the unfulfilled potential of the organization – and the risks involved in trying to reach it. And they see the forces available, within themselves and in the organization around them, for helping to reach that potential.

Q: How is the spiral different from any other consultant's cookbook or manual for organizational change?

A: Although the most convenient way to present the spiral on paper is as a series of steps, it is not a

their own intimate contribution to the very difficulties they say they wish to alter.

The Generative Spiral Model is our articulation of the underlying cycle that lives beneath the collective emergence of this deeper potential in any context. We have formulated it into an approach to help clarify how one might evoke this in a practical context. It begins with small groups of people who have a nagging sense that something different is needed, and the humility to acknowledge that they don't know what that is. Gradually, through dialogue and collective action and inquiry that encompasses ever larger groups of people, the process can catalyze an organization into developing a new understanding of identity, difference, unity, and success. Individuals within this system, whether those traditionally considered leaders or followers, will all find themselves called upon to lead: that is, they will be called upon to become more aware of the generative movement, the "winds of change" in the air – and either to contribute it or to rethink their relationship to the whole.

There are short-term milestones along the path; there are "low-hanging fruit" and other early evidence of success. But the approach also explains why it is counterproductive (and even dangerous sometimes) to try to rush success. Sometimes, as an executive at a large oil company once put it, "You have to go slow to go fast." For organizations, like all living systems, develop in cyclical fashion. There are times of growth and times of stasis, and an effective actor in such a system needs to learn to discern what kinds of actions are appropriate at different times.

## **Generative and Descriptive Order**

The Spiral model is an example of what a "wholeness producing sequence" (see Christopher Alexander, *The Nature of Order*). Unlike a road map, which seeks to define in advance the steps you need to take to get to your destination, a the spiral provides a set of instructions, in a particular sequence, for how to make something – in this case, change. This is the difference between a *generative* order and a *descriptive* one. A generative order is one found in DNA – a set of instructions for the way an emergent set of structures might be applied to the material made available to it, to produce a particular protein. It is not a mini map of the full grown protein. A blueprint, or map is descriptive, in that it defines, in advance, what one is seeking to produce, what the final product will look like, often in fairly large detail.

The spiral to be applied effectively, requires that the users understand this distinction and come to appreciate the capabilities required to step by step let it unfold. This implies a level of internal change in the user, as well as a set of actions in the situation.

strictly linear process; rather it follows what could be called "generative order." What does this imply?

First, each stage of the spiral, once it is brought on, continues throughout the rest of the process. The stages are like instruments in an orchestra coming in one by one, layering on one another in a symphony of transformation. One never stops Discovery, for example, as learning and awareness expand at each stage.

Second, change and learning are self-generating. A whole-system change process, like the transformation of a national organization into a global player, will spark inquiry and change in each individual business unit. These inquiries, if the process is coherent, should follow their own spiral trajectory.

Third, the stages of the spiral foreshadow and echo one another as the change process expands. In the first stage of Initiation, the impulse for change might begin with a few people who transform a basic understanding. In the Civil Rights Movement, this was a group of Black soldiers returning from World War II realizing "we are free." Later, a group of key leaders will undergo a similar process, echoing the earlier change and foreshadowing a larger shift – "I have a dream." This pattern of expansion, of change echoing in wider circles, emanates from a philosophy shared with Gandhi: that we must "be the change we wish to see in the world."

It is possible to anticipate phases of activity within the spiral, and steps that are required; but these must be applied with an awareness of the overall intent, that is – to let deeper potential unfold.

## Phases of evolution

The spiral model unfolds through three main phases:

### • Phase I: Setting the field

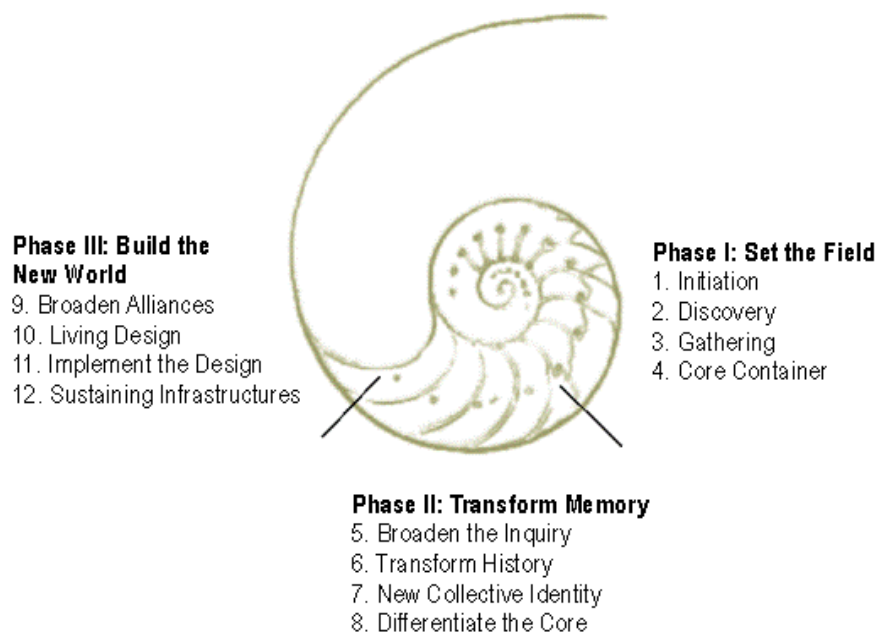
In this stage, a spark flies, insight emerges, and this begins to illuminate a new potential. Deep inquiry and alliance formation grow in pockets of the system, culminating in the formation of a core container – a group of leaders capable of embodying the change as a microcosm of the whole system, and holding steady to provide inclusive leadership.

### • Phase II: Transforming memory

Here the fire of transformation ignites, and people are challenged to release old assumptions about their own identity and the system around them. It is at this phase that the underlying rhythm and potential of the situation begins to reveal itself. Successful experimental actions prove that a new world is possible, and as a result, a new collective identity and sense of purpose takes shape.

### • Phase III: Building a new world

Here people begin to commit to acting and living in a new way. This involves dynamic design of a new system, implementation of the ideas, and reflection on sustaining infrastructures.



Within each of these phases, we identify four steps. These overlap in time; they may occur in different forms in different organizations; but they represent four deliberate sets of moves that take place, typically in the core team at first, then expanding out to the rest of the system.

With each step, new spirals are constantly being initiated as each new group becomes engaged. People are constantly learning about how the old structures work and how they must be transformed in the new world. People are constantly gathering momentum and intensity; new centers and pilot groups are continually forming.

But before we get there, we have to start – typically with the initiation of a relatively small group of people who come together on behalf of the larger systems around them.