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# Life After Senge

***Observations About***
***the***
***Learning Organization in the Late 1990s***

**by**
**Frank Fear**

**March 1, 1997**

MSU Extension LeadNet Leadership Series No. 97-02

# *Lead Net* Presents...

## *"Life After Senge"*
## Observations about the Learning Organization in the Late 1990s

*LeadNet,* Michigan State University Extension's community leadership network, is privileged to present this outstanding paper by Dr. Frank Fear, as the second paper in our *LeadNet Leadership Series.* Dr. Fear's paper challenges us to take a scholarly look at community building practice in our leadership and organizational work. Using the insights of current literature on leadership and organizational learning, the paper makes an important distinction between building community and developing learning communities. We hope that this paper will serve, in Dr. Fear's words, as "a staging ground for learning and action" as we attempt to engage in the "back and forth" process he describes: "establishing meaningful ways to connect reading, practicing, discussing, and reflecting."

Dr. Frank Fear is Professor of Resource Development at Michigan State University and the Founding Chairperson of the Liberty Hyde Bailey Scholars Program, an innovative undergraduate program of the College of Agriculture & Natural Resources. A highly respected transformational leader and an exemplary scholar-practitioner, his research and outreach focus on community, organization, and leadership development; and enhancing university capacity for effective community based outreach.

The purpose of the *LeadNet Leadership Series* is to encourage discussion of topics relevant to community action leadership development, learning communities, community development, and community and organizational leadership development. The first paper of the series was ***Community Action Leadership Development: A Conceptual Framework for Michigan State University Extension*** by Lela Vandenberg and Lorilee Sandmann. We welcome the submission of papers describing projects or processes, presenting literature reviews, or dealing with conceptual or theoretical issues. Our intent is to stimulate "cutting edge" thinking, learning, and action among those working with communities to address critical issues.

--Lela Vandenberg, for the *LeadNet* Coordinating Team, March 1997

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# *"Life After Senge"*
## Observations about the Learning Organization in the Late 1990s

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## INTRODUCTION

### Audience for this Paper

This paper is intended for use by *field- and campus-based practitioners in community development, organization development,* and *leadership development*. The primary audience is *LeadNet*, the MSU Extension network of leadership developers. In the paper, I present my interpretation of the contribution and impact of Peter Senge's work, *The Fifth Discipline,* in two thematic areas— attempts to *"build community"* (i.e., to create a greater sense of interpersonal connectedness) and to enhance individual and collective *learning.* Because these themes were not always as important as they are today, an important part of this paper is a discussion of why community building and learning have achieved prominence in contemporary writing and practice.

### Organization of the Paper

The metaphor of "a journey" applies aptly to our work because how we approach professional practice evolves over time. I start by addressing a profound paradox in my professional life that I believe has been resolved, in part, by my interpretation of Senge's work and by the influence that Senge has had on the literature and in the practice world. The resolution of that paradox—*the ability to better connect scholarship and practice in community resource development*—involves drawing extensively on *community building* and *learning* in what I teach, write, and practice.

I begin the paper by sharing my interpretation of important *community-building literature* that has been published recently in three areas: *leadership* for community building, community building in *organization development*, and community building in *community development.* I follow this by addressing an area of concern: *the dysfunctional consequences associated with* ***over****emphasizing a community-building approach in leadership, organizational, and community practice.* I then turn to the theme of learning and share my interpretation of important literature in the areas of *learning, learner development (focusing on learning for leadership),* and *organizational learning.* It is my belief that current work in learning is vitally important for persons working in the field of community resource development.

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The original version of this paper was presented at a seminar held at the Purdue Room, Michigan State University Memorial Union, on February 7, 1997.

## How This Paper Might Be Used

My hope is that this paper will stimulate learning and encourage follow-up training efforts by *LeadNet*. For example, *LeadNet* members might identify topics and readings described in this paper, purchase and read selected literature, and then discuss the material with an eye toward practice applications in Extension. If that happens, then *LeadNet* members will have used this paper to build a special and important type of community, a learning community.

## A PARADOX OF COMMUNITY RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT: THREE FIELDS OF SCHOLARSHIP, ONE FIELD IN PRACTICE

I remember when I first arrived at Michigan State in 1978. I was struck by the fact that Bill Kimball, the chairperson of the search committee for my position, signed his letters: *Extension Specialist in Community and Organizational Development.* I, too, proclaimed these specializations. But, I thought...so easily said, but not so easily done. Until recently, people like Bill and me have lived with feet planted in different fields of study. That may sound odd because we automatically think that *community development* and *organization development* are inextricably linked in community resource development. In practice they are, but in theory—academic theory, that is—they are not. The literatures are different, written largely by different scholars, who almost always work in what are considered to be different academic fields. The fields have developed separately, sharing similar disciplines (e.g., sociology) to be sure and even sharing some of the same concepts (e.g., empowerment) and practices (e.g., action research), but they are distinct fields nevertheless.

But the story gets worse! When another "obviously linked" field of study is added, *leadership development*, the situation becomes nearly impossible for the scholar-practitioner. It is difficult, indeed, to keep up in one field, but in three fields? Yet, in practice, the difficulty <u>has</u> to be managed: *we know that communities advance largely as a result of efforts that are undertaken in organizations. And, community development requires effective leadership at the organizational and community levels.* It was a paradox: How could three fields connected so obviously in practice be disconnected academically?

## FROM PARADOX TO PROMISE

By the late 1980s, I started to notice subtle—then not so subtle—changes in the way that subject matter was being treated in the three fields. Multiple transitions were underway, an evolution in each of the fields that, by the 1990s, represented a paradigm shift for those working in community resource development. Consider these transitions as examples of what was taking place:

- In community development, we moved from identifying community problems and conducting community needs assessments to identifying community assets and working with leaders and citizens on envisioning community futures.

- In organization development, we moved from improving bureaucratic functioning to enhancing a "sense of community" in organizational settings (e.g., team building).

- In leadership development, we moved from emphasizing leader-centered approaches (e.g., concentrating on leader behaviors and styles) to focusing on follower-centered approaches (e.g., implementing strategies for developing the leadership capacities of followers).

My sense is that the fields are *closer together, in academic terms, today than before*. This coming together seems to have taken place over two phases. In the first phase, *convergence,* distinctions were blurred. For example, leadership approaches—such as transformational leadership—could be employed effectively in either organizational or community settings. In the second phase, *commonality*, connecting points were established so that scholarly practice might be undertaken more seamlessly across the fields. I believe that a common feature, one that clearly emerged in the early 1990s and continues to this day, is ***community building***. Another linking concept, in my opinion, is individual and collective ***learning***. It is difficult to pick up a book on leadership, organizations, or community these days without finding "learning" as a core theme.

It is amazing that, as important as these concepts are in 1996, neither was prominent when I began my professional practice in community resource development over 20 years ago. I believe that *the work of Peter Senge— perhaps more than any other person—stimulated widespread consideration of each concept.* Consequently, I assign significant value to his widely read, critically acclaimed, and influential book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization,* which was published in 1990.

## COMMUNITY BUILDING AND LEARNING: SENGE'S CONTRIBUTION

Although Senge speaks directly about the learning organization, his book is really about learning and about community building (despite the fact that "community" is not listed in the index). For example, on p. 2 he writes: "Learning organizations are possible because, deep down, we are all learners." Some of his "disciplines" seem to be more about learning—*systems thinking, personal mastery, and mental models.* Other disciplines—*building a shared vision* and *team learning*—address the topic of community building. Perhaps more than anything else, Senge helps us ***connect*** community building and learning. He tells us how important it is to have "learning-ful conversations" that "balance inquiry with advocacy" (p. 9). He also implores us to understand that, in connecting learning with community, *we embark upon a lifelong journey.* If that journey is truly learning-ful, then it should have a *transformative effect on how we function collectively*:

> To practice a discipline is to be a lifelong learner. You "never arrive," you spend your life mastering disciplines. You can never say, "We are a learning organization," any more than you can say, "I am an enlightened person." The more you learn, the more acutely aware you become of your ignorance. Thus a corporation cannot be "excellent" in the sense of having arrived at a permanent excellence; it is always in the state of practicing the disciplines of learning....
>
> When you ask people about what it is like being part of a great team, what is most striking is the meaningfulness of the experience. People talk about being part of something larger than themselves, of being connected, of being generative.... ...the basic meaning of a "learning organization"—an organization...[or community]...that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future. For such an organization...[or community]..., it is not enough merely to survive. "Survival learning" or what is more often termed "adaptive learning" is important—indeed it is necessary. But for a learning organization, "adaptive learning must be joined by "generative learning," learning that enhances our capacity to create (Senge 1990: 9,14,15).

Toward the end of his book, Senge speaks explicitly about the implications of the five disciplines for ***leadership***. In Chapter 18, Senge offers three observations that have stayed with me over the years:

> ...the new of leadership...centers on...leaders...[as]...*designers, stewards and teachers.* They are responsible for *building organizations...[and communities]*...where *people continually expand their capacities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models*—that is, they are ***responsible for learning***....

> Unfortunately, much more common are leaders who...*manage almost exclusively at the level of events*. Such leaders deal in visions and crises, and little in between.... Under their leadership, an organization...[or community]...caroms from crisis to crisis....
>
> ...[what impresses me about]...most of the outstanding leaders I have worked with...is the *clarity and persuasiveness of their ideas, the depth of their commitment, and their openness to continually learning more*. They do not "have the answer." But they do instill confidence in those around them that, ***together***, we *can learn whatever we need to learn in order to achieve the results we truly desire* (Senge 1990:340,355,359, italics and emphasis added).

Reading Senge's book and reflecting on it has changed the way that I think about organizations, community, and leadership—the pillars of community resource development. If you have read the book, perhaps it had the same effect on you. If you found any part of it to be useful, I heartily recommend buying, reading, and applying in your work the follow-up compendium, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization* (Senge et al., 1994). In it you will find a variety of practice-relevant tools.

## "LIFE AFTER SENGE"

What has happened since the publication of *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990? Important questions to which I shall devote the rest of this paper are: *What literature has emerged since 1990 on the topics of community building and learning? What does this literature offer scholar-practitioners in community resource development?*

Obviously, each of us reads something and then evaluates what we read. Some of your evaluation criteria might include: *Does this material advance my understanding of the subject significantly? How well does it fit with other things that I believe? Can I use this work productively in my practice?* Unquestionably, evaluating literature is evaluating an art form—each of us might come to a very different conclusion about the same reading. So, my purpose here is to share with you the *literature that has had the most impact on me—scholarly contributions that I find to be written well, provocative, powerful, and usable.* Each piece extends my knowledge and, at the same time, serves a different function. As a collection, they represent the best documents in my personal library, documents that I draw upon time and time again when I write, speak, teach, and consult. We start with the community-building literature and later turn to the learning literature.

## LITERATURE ON COMMUNITY BUILDING

The literature to be discussed here is presented in three categories: *leadership* for community building, community building in *organizations*, and building community in *community settings*.

### Leadership for Community Building

We endorse and value "building community" as a core theme in leadership practice. *In which leadership books are this theme prominent?* I am drawn especially to the recent book by James O'Toole, *Leading Change: The Argument for Values-Based Leadership* (1995). O'Toole is a brilliant and provocative writer, a former distinguished professor at the University of Southern California who currently serves on the staff of the Aspen Institute in Colorado. He discusses leadership and the connection to values eloquently in the preface:

> Learning to lead is...not simply a matter of style, of how-to, or following some recipe, or even mastering "the vision thing." Instead, leadership is about ideas and values. It is about understanding the differing and conflicting needs of followers. And it is about energizing followers to pursue a better end state (goal) that they had thought possible. It is about creating a values-based umbrella large enough to accommodate the various interests of followers, but focused enough to direct all their energies in pursuit of a common good. In practical business terms, it is about creating conditions under which all followers can perform independently and effectively toward a major objective (O'Toole 1995:xi).

One of the most important contributions of O'Toole's book, in my opinion, is the way that he outlines key ingredients for what I call *moral leadership*—leadership *that nurtures the soul as it seeks to accomplish other organizational ends*. He compares what he calls "Rushmorean" with "Realist" leadership assumptions and practices. This is essentially a comparison of community builders (Rushmoreans) and leaders who prefer power and control as their leadership style (Realists). He sprinkles theory and research with many case studies. Then he searches for the common features associated with values-based leadership:

> Inclusive leaders enable others to lead by sharing information, by fostering a sense of community, and by creating a consistent pattern of rewards, structure, process, and communication. They are committed to the principle of opportunity, giving all followers the chance to make a contribution to the organization. The values-based leadership that they all practice is based on an inspiring vision. And each is dedicated to institutionalizing continuous change, renewal, innovation, and learning. And the bottom line in what they do is adherence to the moral principles of respect for people (O'Toole 1995: 70).

One of the themes of O'Toole's book—perhaps labeling it as a goal would be more appropriate—is to show that values-based leadership "works better" than tough, aggressive, power-control leadership. He addresses this topic both in theory and by case example. Never, though, is he able to show convincingly that values-based leadership is superior when measured in organizational performance terms. This may bother those who would prefer to show that "it works" using the metrics that Realist leaders might employ. On the other hand, "doing what is right" has intrinsic value and should stand on its own feet.

Overall, O'Toole does us a great service because he answers an important question plainly and persuasively—a question that is critical to all those who seek community building as a focus of leadership development training and practice: *What does it take to be a community builder?* The difficulty, if not the agony, associated with this work is well described in his discussion of Max DePree and the DePree family at Herman Miller (see pp. 41-51). O'Toole's treatment of resistance to change (see Chapter 13, especially) is terrific because he includes in the discussion the reasons why and how "the haves" often resist change and make it less possible to build community.

## Building Community in Organizations

### The Organizational Leadership Work of Kouzes and Posner

About six years ago, I read *The Leadership Challenge: How to Get Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations* by James Kouzes and Barry Posner (1988). It is one of the most important books on leadership development written in the last decade, in my opinion. The authors' primary frame of reference is organizational leadership, and I have used it extensively in my organization development teaching and practice. I also believe that it is a "must read" by any person who wishes to assume a leadership position in organizations. In their research, Zouzes and Posner found that five practices are common to successful leaders. The book is organized around an in-depth description, explanation, and analysis of each practice:

*challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way for others, and encouraging the heart.*

As you might expect, I was eager to read a follow-up book by these authors. In 1993, I literally stumbled across *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It* (Kouzes and Posner, 1993) while purchasing another book for a friend at a local bookstore. Of course, I bought the book immediately and read it soon thereafter. Community building is not a theme of the 1988 book. It is, however, centerstage in the 1993 book. There, in the chapter on "Affirming Shared Values," I found these words:

> Community is the new metaphor for organizations. In his book, *Love and Profit*, seasoned Fortune 500 executive Jim Autry explains that the workplace is becoming today's neighborhood and discusses the role of community at work: "By invoking the metaphor of community, we imply that we in business are bound by a fellowship of endeavor in which we commit to mutual goals, in which we contribute to the best of our abilities, in which each contribution is recognized and credited, in which there is a forum for all voices to be heard, in which our success contributes to the success of the common enterprise and to the success of others, in which we can disagree and hold differing viewpoints without withdrawing from the community, in which we are free to express how we feel as well as what we think, in which our value to society is directly related to the quality of our commitment and effort, and in which we take care of each other." Creating a community requires promoting shared values and developing an appreciation for the value of working cooperatively and caring about one another.... Recent studies document the central role played by community in the relationship between leaders and their constituents. For example, leaders who establish cooperative relationships inspire commitment and are considered competent. Their credibility is enhanced by building community through common purpose and by championing shared values. In contrast, competitive and independent leaders are seen as both obstructive and ineffective (Kouzes and Posner 1993:129,130).

In a very real way, Kouzes and Posner help make the case for invoking community as the metaphor for organizations. But they do not provide us with extensive advice about how to build community in organizational settings. That is the purpose of the next two books that I will review for you.

**Building Community through Organizational Management**

I am thoroughly impressed with the 1996 book, *Building Community: The Human Side of Work*, by George Manning, Kent Curtis, and Steve McMillen. This is an important, if not stunning, piece of work because *building community is not only advanced as important, it is their centerpiece for organizational analysis and organization development.* They draw inspiration for this community building theme from the work of Marvin Weisbord (to be reviewed later in this paper), They also note the impact of Robert Bellah's work, in his influential *Habits of the Heart* (1996, revised edition), by discussing the inevitable tension that we experience—*to be individuals and, at the same time, to be part of something larger than self*:

> Americans value the individual first and foremost, but we have learned paradoxically that it is only through community—the meaningful interaction with others—that we can make sense of our own lives.... The essence of this is to value differences, build on each other's strengths, transcend individual limitations, and achieve the full potential of community. Writer and educator John Gardner states, "We are a community-building species." He goes on to describe the conditions necessary to experience true community: shared vision...wholeness incorporating diversity...shared culture...internal communication...consideration and trust...maintenance and governance...participation and shared leadership...development of younger members...affirmation...and links with outside groups (Manning et al., 1996:xix-xx).

The authors then proceed to essentially *rewrite the traditional management textbook by infusing each and every topic with community-building concepts and approaches.* Manning et al. not only provide an extensive literature review in their treatment of diverse organizational topics, *they combine this scholarship by providing readers with an* ***impressive*** *array of practice tools.* Every organization developer should own this book and draw upon it regularly!

**Creating a Collaborative Workplace**

Many writers talk about collaboration but few, I believe, really help us better understand what it means and how to achieve it. The exception is Edward Marshall in his 1995 book, *Transforming the Way We Work: The Power of the Collaborative Workplace,* which was published in collaboration with the American Management Association. This is essentially three-books-in-one. I recommend the first chapter, "Collaboration: The Quest for the 21st Century Workplace" to all. It sets the tone by answering fundamental questions: Why is collaboration so important in today's workplace? What is collaboration? Then, in Part I (Chapters 2-6), Marshall discusses various components of the collaborative workplace, including the collaborative *work ethic*, the collaborative *culture*, collaborative *leadership*, and collaborative *teams*. Part II, the final section of the book, includes a variety of how-to-do-it chapters.

Having given this content and scope overview, let me share with you some of what Marshall writes:

> In my...research and work with hundreds of companies over the past 25 years, seven core values have surfaced again and again as the basis for effective work relationships: *respect for people; honor and integrity; ownership and alignment; consensus; full responsibility and accountability; trust-based relationships;* and *recognition and growth.* These core values represent a cultural framework for the 21st century organization, a framework that adds up to collaboration. *Collaboration is the premier candidate to replace hierarchy as the organizing principle for leading and managing the 21st century workplace.* It is a way of life that enables us to meet our fundamental needs for self-esteem and mutual respect in the workplace. *It is a principle-based process of working together, which produces trust, integrity, and breakthrough results by building true consensus, ownership, and alignment in all aspects of the organization* (Marshall 1995:4).

I especially appreciate the way that Marshall incorporates the *contextual variable* in his treatment of collaboration. This allows us to know *when and where a collaborative approach is more likely to succeed.*

> Collaborative approaches to leading and managing, however, are not for everyone. There are a number of situations where this approach should either not be attempted or attempted with caution. In all of these there appears to be a common denominator: The fundamental values and beliefs of senior management are such that they do not accept that collaboration is the way in which they want their organizations to evolve; or they believe that it is the wrong way to manage. In some instances, management may intellectually understand the need for collaboration, but does not yet know how to implement it. In this situation, the collaborative option can be pursued, but with caution, since there may not be a high level of commitment to see the process through (Marshall 1995:7).

**Teams in the Workplace: Theory and Practice**

There may not be a more important, concrete way to build community within organizational settings than to adopt team-based approaches. However, my students know that I am not shy about sharing a bias about teams in organizational settings: *Teams need to be understood in organizational context.* That means we must consider the *specific* organizational context within which we are attempting to innovate with teams (e.g., history, leadership temperament of top- and middle-management). Also, we must be knowledgeable about the broader organizational literature (e.g., organizational culture, leadership) *before* we focus on the team literature and attempt to design a team-based organizational innovation. Those seeking to innovate with teams are foolish if they believe that all they need to do is become familiar with the literature on teams. A starting point is the *organizational* literature, <u>not</u> the team literature.

The bottom line is this: making teamwork an essential part of the workplace, especially when structured in the form of self-directed work teams (SDWT), represents *a sophisticated and advanced form of organizational innovation!* In organizations with limited team experience, a considerable amount of savvy (intellectual and strategic) will be required to introduce and *sustain* team-based performance. Because of this, I recommend four books for those persons who want to gain a better understanding of how to implement team-based efforts in conventional organizational settings. Each performs a different function in helping us to establish a more robust picture of team-based concepts, approaches, and implementation strategies.

The first book that I recommend is *The Boundaryless Organization: Breaking the Chains of Organizational Structure*. Ashkenas et al. (1995) do a wonderful job of describing—in very clear and powerful terms—what is involved in moving from a more rigid, bureaucratic style to a more fluid, permeable structure. They give examples and offer numerous principles for breaking down vertical and horizontal structures in complex organizations. Next, I recommend becoming familiar with the work that Susan Mohrman and her colleagues have been doing at the University of Southern California. They have been researching and writing about team-based organizations for over a decade. One of their recent books, *Designing Team-Based Organizations* (1995), offers a powerful introduction of things to keep in mind when moving organizations in a team-based direction. I like especially the first part of the book. Chapter 2, "Exploring the Contours of the Team-Based Organization," is very good and a must-read.

Two books on SDWTs seem especially appropriate for reading and discussing. The first is a how-to-do-it book by one of the leading practitioners in the field, Kimball Fisher, entitled *Leading Self-Directed Work Teams: A Guide to Development New Team Leadership Skills* (1993). I like this book because, as you can detect from the title, it is written with a leadership theme. Kimball highlights leadership requirements at multiple levels of the organization, from top-level management to the SDWT level. It is written simply and directly with considerable emphasis on the planning and start-up phases. The flip side of what to do is, of course, what *not* to do. Darcy Hitchcock and Marsha Willard do a marvelous job of identifying and describing the reasons why teams fail (they cite a 50% failure record in the beginning of the book) in their 1995 book, *Why Teams Can Fail and What to Do About It.* The authors identify a number of failure-factors and then discuss each in detail. I found the chapter on performance appraisal and rewards to be especially instructive.

## Building Community in Community Settings

**Looking at Community Through New Lenses**

One of the most important books on community published recently is *Creating Community Anywhere: Finding Support and Connection in a Fragmented World*, by Carolyn Shaffer and Kristin Anundsen (1993). This is not a community development book if, by "community," you mean community as a place-based phenomenon. It is a book about developing community where community exists geographically, virtually, spiritually, or as the title of the book says, "anywhere." It is, perhaps more than anything else, ***a*** community development book for the 1990s because our concept of what constitutes community must be more expansive today then before.

The first chapter, "A Return to Community," is a must-read for community developers. In this chapter, the authors help us see "community" with new eyes. The theme of ***new forms for new realities*** permeates the chapter. They write:

> The kinds of communities that are emerging today tend to be more fluid than those of the past. They consist of systems of evolving relationships that may or may not have a geographical base or a clear organizational structure. Members may leave, and new members may join, without destroying the group. Since these emerging communities are identified more by their process than by their form, they can shift form and function and move from one level of consciousness to another. For example, a neighborhood association that begins by focusing strictly on business can flower into a deeply personal, even highly conscious community for whom business meetings represent just a small part of its life together (Shaffer and Anundsen 1993:16).

Perhaps the most important contribution of this book is the typology proposed by the authors for understanding community in this era of "new forms for new realities." The authors begin by defining community as a *"dynamic whole that emerges when a group of people participate in common practices, depend upon one another, make decisions together, identify themselves as part of something larger than the sum of their individual relationships, and commit themselves for the long term to one another and to the group's well-being"* (p.10). They then identify three forms of community: functional, conscious, and deep:

- *Functional communities exist for an extrinsic purpose*: to accomplish one or more important collective objectives. Most of us belong to numerous functional communities.

- *Conscious communities*, on the other hand, *address the extrinsic purposes associated with functional community, but they also exist to meet socio-emotional needs,* "...the members' needs for personal expression, growth, and transformation." Participants in conscious communities "...reflect together on their common purpose, internal processes, and group dynamics..... Such a community renews itself regularly, celebrating individual and group passages and revising and recommitting to its vision and mission. In doing this, it challenges its members and itself to move beyond roles to wholeness."

- The final form or type of community, the *deep community*, takes the conscious community to a higher level: *it is what many hope community will be, an interconnected form that is rich in terms of the meaning of community and how community functions.* The authors write:

> In deep community, members easily and naturally attune to what is best for themselves and the group. When they sense an imbalance, they give immediate attention and clear feedback to the others—just as the brain, heart, and other organs of the body—enabling each to make whatever adjustments are needed to bring the system back in balance. Every member knows how to lead, follow, listen, speak from the heart, and mediate conflicts, and performs these functions spontaneously whenever a situation calls for them. Such deep community remains rare at this time, but it is something to aspire to as you struggle to master your...new toolbox of community-building tools (Shaffer and Anundsen 1993:13).

Because this book offers new ways of thinking about community, with recommendations for an aligned set of community practices, I strongly recommend it to you. It is also intensely multidisciplinary with strong roots in humanistic psychology. The ties to humanistic psychology are particularly strong with respect to the way community is interpreted by such writers as M. Scott Peck in *The Different Drum* (1987a) and *The Road Less Traveled* (1987b). The book also blends nicely with the recent writings associated with the communitarian movement, such as you will find in Amitai Etzioni's *The Spirit of Community* (1993).

**Collaborative Planning as a Community-Building Tool**

Not too many years ago I was invested in strategic thinking and strategic planning. I used the words frequently, taught strategic planning processes, and applied strategic planning processes in my practice (e.g., Bryson, 1988). I rarely do any of that today. There is a practical reason: all the strategic planning models and frameworks with which I am familiar reference the right concepts, include the right steps, and seek the right outcomes, but they are cumbersome, if not tedious, to apply. And sustained action may be difficult to achieve. Coupled to this concern is my gone-sour attitude about organizational and community visioning. I have participated in visioning efforts that are a hodgepodge of problem analysis, short-range planning, issue identification, and open discussion. Ironically, what rarely emerges is a vision! There **had** to be a better way, I thought.

Seeking an alternative, I initiated a different kind of approach when organizing the technology visioning effort in MSU Extension last year. I wrote then:

> We experience two fundamental dilemmas in organizations: we feel the need to plan, but often don't take the time to plan; and when we create a plan, we often don't implement it. Consequently, we end up with some organizations that, for all intents and purposes, don't have a plan; and we have other organizations that have a plan, but it "sits on the shelf." These common situations speak powerfully to us: *something* is happening that makes it less possible for intention to translate into reality. My suspicion is that we face this dilemma because most organizations make planning a separate function—distinct from the realities of the everyday workplace. If my assessment is correct, we need to find a way to narrow that gap (ideally, close it completely) through what I call ***seamless and fluid planning***. *By seamless and fluid, I mean planning that connects to everyday organizational reality, on the one hand, and leads to immediate organizational application, on the other hand.*
>
> After years of searching, I found a miracle drug that makes seamless and fluid planning possible: *EZ2...easy-to-*<u>do</u>, *easy-to-*<u>implement</u>, and *easy-to-*<u>update</u>.
>
> - *If planning isn't easy-to-do, then participants will view it as a chore—something to be avoided.* A corollary of easy-to-do is "done quickly." In the first place, planning must have an intuitive quality to it. Participants should be able to see why they are spending their time on planning, and how the planning effort will be applied. And, no matter how straightforward and simple the planning process might be, if it takes too much time, people will disengage mentally.
>
> - *If planning isn't easy-to-implement, then it becomes theory unrelated to practice.* Planning that doesn't lead to application is planning that probably shouldn't be done in the first place. The "done quickly" corollary applies here, too. If the planning outcomes aren't applied within a reasonable amount of time after the planning episode is completed, then planning loses its credibility.
>
> - *If planning isn't easy-to-update, then it will become a one-time experience.* Few people and organizations have the discipline to engage repeatedly in planning efforts that aren't perceived to be high pay-off events. So, making a plan easy-to-update will encourage participants to come to the table again and again, hopefully without hesitation or regret (Fear, 1996a).

For those who seek a research-based, practice-proven approach to planning; an approach that combines some of the best elements of strategic planning, visioning, and "EZ2," I strong recommend **Future Search**, the planning model pioneered by Marvin Weisbord and his colleagues. The process is very well described in *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities* (1995) by Weisbord and Sandra Janoff. Four things about the title of this book are noteworthy. It

- is a visioning process (focuses on the future, not on the present or on the past)
- is a practical way to plan (actionable)
- brings together diverse interests (seeks to establish common ground), and
- is applicable in both organizational and community settings.

The book is the third in the trilogy authored by Weisbord: *Productive Workplaces: Organizing and Managing for Dignity, Meaning, and Community* (1987), which is very much a primer in organizations and organization development; and *Discovering Common Ground: How Future Search Conferences Bring Together People to Achieve Breakthrough Innovation, Empowerment, Shared Vision, and Collaborative Action* (1992), which is a precursor to *Future Search.*

*Future Search* is a way to build community in that it is a "...large group planning meeting that brings a "whole system" into the room to work on a task-focused agenda.... ...people have a chance to take ownership of their past, present, and future, confirm their mutual values, and commit to action plans grounded in reality" (p. ix). The meetings involve 50-70 people. Diverse stakeholders are included, not just persons who work for the organization or live in the community. In a 2½-day format, participants review the past, explore the present, create future scenarios, identify common ground, and make plans.

Because the process is based in organization theory, and has been tried, evaluated, and improved over time with practice, the Weisbord and Janoff book includes application tips as well as caveats. The authors discuss a number of conditions for success (see Chapter 3), and spend a considerable amount of time discussing what *Future Search* can and cannot do. For example, it is not designed as "a prop" for inept leaders. It is also not a problem-solving process in that very little attention is given to describing the "problems of the past" or trying to address conflicts that may exist currently. The purpose, to use the title of Weisbord's 1992 book, is to *discover common ground* for moving ahead. Then, group members (organization- or community-based) divide up responsibility for engaging in tasks that will make it possible to achieve the desired future.

To make this possible, the authors recommend *spending a considerable amount of time planning the event* and *ensuring that a cross-section of stakeholders participate*. Each of these recommendations may be difficult to accomplish: the press of time frequently means that less time gets devoted to planning the session, and it is often threatening to have a variety of stakeholders in the room at the same time. Given these issues, organizational and community leaders who sponsor *Future Search* must thoroughly understand what the process entails and agree to engage in it unconditionally (not partially).

Along this line, Weisbord and Janoff suggest that one of the most difficult things for groups is to "get real" about their collective circumstances. They describe one dynamic that comes up repeatedly when groups of people assemble to discuss their past, consider their present, and explore future opportunities. Here, the authors draw from Janssen's (1982) description of the "four-room apartment"—*contentment, denial, confusion, and renewal*:

> In "contentment," we accept things the way they are, making the best of what is, without hassle. What moves us out of contentment is an unfamiliar experience that disturbs the status quo. We'd rather not admit, let alone deal with, what has happened. So, we go into the "denial" room, where we act as if everything's okay when at a deep level an unheard voice nags us that things are a mess. At some point, however, we are likely to own up.

> When we admit we are frustrated and unsure of what to do, we've gone through the door to "confusion." The decor of the confusion room is high anxiety. We are in a mess and know it. Only then are we ready for new opportunities (Weisbord and Janoff 1995:63).

Ironically, groups that are committed to community building may stay longer in the rooms of contentment and denial because they value the feelings of other group members and seek to live "respectfully." On the other hand, groups that are in a state of agitation may move rapidly to an "attack mode," thereby making it more difficult to achieve a sense of community. This is one of the reasons the authors describe the process as "multiple roller-coaster rides." Because the process is designed to engage the mind, the heart, and the soul, "whole people" are encouraged to participate wholly. This does not make the process easy. But it may lead to more productive, longer-term outcome.

The purpose here is not to describe the *Future Search* process step-by-step. Buy the book, read it, and discuss its applicability for your work. Because a national group of facilitators has been established, it is possible to be trained in the process, to involve others as trainers, and to participate as a trainer in the conferences organized by other groups and communities. The point I want to make here is that *Future Search* would appear to be a *viable way* (e.g., practical and effective) *to help organizations and communities build community, enhance their joint learning as they plan for the future, and engage in long-term action.* It is visioning and strategic planning at the same time. However, because of the way it is organized and offered, I believe that *Future Search* mitigates much of the "downside" associated with many other visioning and strategic planning models.

## A CAVEAT ABOUT COMMUNITY BUILDING: TOO MUCH OF A "GOOD THING" CAN HAVE "NOT-SO-GOOD" CONSEQUENCES

A few years ago, when I first realized the profound influence that community thinking was having in organization and leadership development, I was absolutely delighted. At first, I thought, "Finally!" Then, based on what I was observing, that delight turned to concern. Within a short period of time, I found myself facing this issue: *How I might address the negative outcomes that were connected to an **over**emphasis on community building.*

I began to see tell-tale signs of serious problems. On the one hand, I saw people being drawn to the notion of community building for very good reasons—believing that it is the "right thing to do" and finding it a way to combat the disconnected, fragmented, if not "soul-less" life that can afflict bureaucratically intense environments led by power and control-focused managers. More and more leaders seemed to appreciate the fact that we need to connect with each other, that we need to be affirmed by significant others, and that we need to be part of something larger than self. Consequently, it was easy to understand why community building had come to prominence. On the other hand, though, *I found evidence that too much emphasis on community building was beginning to interfere with the ability of some groups, organizations, and communities to function effectively.*

I came to the conclusion that "a good thing"—*"community-ness"*—was becoming <u>too</u> important. In a recent paper written for the CLIMB statewide leadership program (Fear, 1996b), I defined community-ness as the extent to which:

- our identities are tied significantly to an organization or geographic community
- we share a common set of values
- we believe that success is connected to collective effort, and
- we act on this belief by working together to achieve common and valued ends.

These, of course, are "good things" that we promote in our organizational, community, and leadership work. But I was finding evidence that community-ness and performance outcomes (e.g., innovativeness) did not seem to be connected as significantly as they might, should, and could. What a profound irony! For years, I had expressed concerns about the *opposite* dynamic happening: overemphasis on a restricted set of performance outcomes, a set that often did not include the goal of achieving a strong sense of community. Now, I was seeing evidence that an overemphasis on community building was having dysfunctional consequences for some organizations and communities.

How? Here are warning signs that I have observed:

- Intense focus on process (as ritual) without a corresponding emphasis on product, outcome, and quality.

- Intense focus on peoples' feelings without a corresponding emphasis on peoples' capacities and talents.

- Endorsement of teamwork and team behavior without a corresponding emphasis on how each team member contributes uniquely and significantly to team performance (in fact, I saw evidence of "free-rider" behavior in some teams). In addition, overall team performance seemed to be less important than the socio-emotional contributions that team membership offered to team members.

- Evidence of what Janis (1971) termed, "groupthink." In groupthink, group consensus and harmony become primary goals.

- Evidence that the "messenger" was becoming more important than the "message." This happens when a organizational or community group seeks counsel and guidance from only certain people, typically from members of an "inner circle" (often people who are similar in background and approach) to whom group members accord high levels of trust. The group's capacity to entertain and act on an idea is not driven by the quality and/or appropriateness of the idea but, rather, by the source of the idea. Innovativeness and "missed opportunities" often result.

- Evidence of what Morgan (1986) calls single-loop learning (i.e., learning how to do something and then doing it repeatedly). Limited time was being spent on reflecting (i.e., learning from experience) or on what Vaill (1996) calls reflexive or meta-learning (i.e., learning how to learn).

- Emphasis on what Noer (1996) calls "accessing others" (i.e., interpersonal learning) as a way of learning with less emphasis on learning through other venues (e.g., reading).

Although I applaud, endorse, and encourage building community, I am also saying that, like so many things in life, *too much of a good thing can have dysfunctional effects. Taken to its extreme, a community-building approach can lead to organizational and community "dry rot," that is, an eating away from within that eventually destroys.* Ironically, leaders who *over*emphasize building community may render longer-term harm to organizations and communities. Put another way: *community-ness as a goal and community building as a practice are, in my opinion, necessary but not sufficient for achieving effective/successful community development, organization development, and leadership development.* What helps round out the equation, then?

The work on *learning*, especially the recent work, is very helpful in addressing the concerns that I have shared here. First, and foremost, the obvious questions are: *Learning by whom? About what?* The "by whom" is important because learning applies equally well at the individual, team, organizational, and community levels. And, the "about what" spans a number of domains: *learning new concepts, theories, and practices; learning about self and others; learning to work more effectively with others; and learning to function more ethically and morally.*

A dedication to learning—constant and expansive learning—is especially important in a world that is changing constantly, a world that Peter Vaill (1991) has described as "permanent white water." Learning applies at multiple levels in the work associated with community resource development. That is because individuals make up organizations and communities. Obviously, without people, we cannot possibly have organizations and communities. So, the lessons of learning are transcendent in nature; they apply at, and beyond, the individual level. And, when applied to the work of leadership development, a focus on learning allows us to incorporate many community-building concepts and practices, such as learning collectively and facilitating the development of new leaders.

## NEW (AND NOT SO NEW) LITERATURE ON LEARNING

Let us now turn to the learning literature. Most of what I shall review and interpret here has been published since the release of Senge's book. I start with *an interpretation of learning as it applies to leadership*, move to a consideration of *"learning about learning,"* and close by *reviewing two, recently published books* that I believe make enormous contributions to our thinking about learning and how it applies in organizational and community settings.

### A Different Kind of Leader-Centered Approach in Leadership Development: "The Centered Leader"

Probably a good number of the persons reading this paper are pleased with the metamorphosis of the leadership literature over the past decade or so: *from* a leader-centered approach with emphasis, for example, on leader behaviors for accomplishing leader-defined goals *to* a follower-centered approach with focus on serving followers' needs and creating empowering environments. This has been a healthy, community-sensitive transition that I applaud.

However, about five years ago, a colleague of mine made an off-hand comment at a meeting that has changed the way that I think about leadership and leadership development. *It led me to think much more deeply about the* ***value of a leader-centered emphasis****, but a* ***different*** *kind from what we have come to know.* What prompted this change of thinking on my part? In referring to a person who had just made a presentation at a meeting, my colleague leaned over to me and said, "I wonder what is his center of gravity?" He was asking, in essence, about *the leader's values, core beliefs, hopes, aspirations, and all the things that make each of us human.* Afterward, I engaged my friend in a conversation about the meaning of this "center of gravity" concept as it applied to effective leadership. The response was simple, straightforward, and profound. It went something like this:

> "How might we expect a leader to create a strong sense of community, to build leadership capacity in others, and to serve the needs of many people in a variety of other ways unless he or she is comfortable with self and also possesses a strong and abiding set of values?"

After reflecting on what he had to say, I developed the concept of **the centered leader**. When leaders are "centered," we might say that they

- stand for important things
- have a strong and abiding set of core values
- feel comfortable with themselves (i.e., are self-confident)
- create an empowering empowerment in which others make important contributions, and
- know what they hope to achieve through their leadership.

## Exploring the Dimensions of "Centered-ness"

I immediately went to the literature to see what I might find along this line. What my friend was saying went beyond the "ethical" or "servant" or "authentic" leadership work that I had been reading. It was not until I read Peter Vaill's 1991 book that I discovered a starting point in the literature that was helpful to me. Vaill is the former dean of the business college at George Washington University and currently serves as a director of one of the school's graduate programs. He is a "deep thinker" who provokes, stimulates, and prods. The book, *Managing as Performing Art: New Ideas for a World of Chaotic Change*, is an important piece of literature.

Vaill's premise is that leadership is tough work, not so much because of the role itself, but because of the environment in which it takes place. To portray this environment adequately, Vaill uses the metaphor of *permanent white water,* a phrase actually introduced by a participant in one of Vaill's seminars. It means, simply, that we work in environments that are unpredictable, volatile, and quickly changing—what Vaill calls "stepping into the dark." In this sort of environment, the leader *must start with self.* Vaill believes that, if there is any hope of surviving the white water personally or if the leader is to effectively serve the organization or community in efforts to traverse white water, the *leader-as-self needs to be defined, clarified, and nurtured.* Otherwise, leading may have the same result awaiting the canoeist—disaster when the canoe and those in it are thrown into the churn.

But even "centered leaders" can be swept away in white water. To survive, Vaill (1991:29) argues that leaders must work smarter in three ways: *collectively*, *reflectively*, and *spiritually*. The recent contributions on collaborative and team-based leadership (reviewed earlier in this paper) offer insights into how leaders can work smarter collectively. What about working smarter reflectively and spiritually? Here is what Vaill has to say:

> Reflection is the capacity to "notice oneself noticing"; that is, to step back and see one's mind working.... In philosophical language, it is "phenomenological reduction".... Reflection's greatest enemies are dogma and pressure, and neither is in short supply.... Authoritarian systems...do not want to see much free thinking going on. The truth is that not enough free thinking is going on. Reflection, singly and in groups, is an absolutely crucial resource for understanding the nature of whatever white water is presently coursing through the system (Vaill 1991:30-31).
>
> To work spiritually smarter is to pay more attention to one's own spiritual qualities, feelings, insights, and yearnings. It is to reach more deeply into oneself for that which is unquestionably authentic. It is to attune oneself to those truths one considers timeless and unassailable, the deepest principles one knows. It is not easy in the modern organization to maintain this attunement; it has to be worked at, yet I don't hear enough talk about what working at it involves. I want to put that back on the agenda (Vaill 1991:31).

## Leadership as "Inner Greatness"

Vaill's work is stage-setting. Another author, Peter Koestenbaum, offers us more insights into the "centered leader" in his 1991 book, *Leadership: The Inner Side of Greatness*. Koestenbaum, a philosopher emeritus at San Jose State University, works currently as an organizational consultant. According to Koestenbaum, leading is not so much about the way one thinks or even the way one acts, as much as it is about the way one *wills*. It is, above all else, the capacity to make things possible—things that are "worthy and noble" and to make a contribution to society. Leading can not happen when defined in this way without connecting the work of leading with "your personal depth" (Koestenbaum 1991:2,3).

To help us learn how to make this connection, Koestenbaum advances his ***Leadership Diamond Model***. In this model, leaders commit themselves to "greatness" in four domains:

- Vision—to think big and new
- Reality—to be practical and to have no illusions
- Ethics—to be of service to others in appropriate ways
- Courage—to risk and to do so with sustained initiative.

Koestenbaum (1991:36,38,39) writes:

> What differentiates the Leadership Diamond is its reliance on philosophic depth.... Every person faces an ethical responsibility to make a root leadership decision: to create a life of meaning, a commitment to worthiness, and a devotion to excellence.... That is the Zen of work, the decision to sanctify the work you do—not because the...[organization]...requires it...but because the salvation of your soul demands that what you do every day be crafted like a poem, be composed like a work of art and illuminated by a halo of profound significance.

One of the most important contributions made by Koestenbaum in my estimation is the way that he helps leaders put this philosophy into operation. Believing that leadership is about sharing, not about possessing, he advances the notion of TOTAL leadership. TOTAL is an acronym for "Teach Others the Teaching of Authentic Leadership." Through TOTAL, leaders empower by helping others to achieve their inner side of greatness. Koestenbaum refers to this as "the empowerment chain." The first step in TOTAL is to develop a *leadership mind.* That means, among other things, to

- believe that leadership can be learned and taught
- be a teacher of leadership
- be a leader in five areas of life—work, family, self, social responsibility (community), and financial stability
- use leadership as an instrument to achieve a higher state of health—physically, mentally, and spiritually—for you and others
- strive for depth, humility, and a commitment to being (i.e., learning from living).

TOTAL includes a robust application of the Leadership Diamond Model. Each of the four points in the diamond—vision, reality, ethics, and courage—represents a *strategy*, but each strategy includes a *set of tactics* that must be implemented to achieve greatness. Koestenbaum advances *four tactical levels* for *each strategy*: tactics at the *professional, social, psychological, and philosophical* levels. This means that we can talk about **strategy-tactic linkages**, such as vision-professional (e.g., developing high level reasoning ability needed to craft a vision), reality-social (e.g., having extensive information about your organization or community), ethics-psychological (e.g., being a person who personally values the importance of timely interpersonal communication), and courage-philosophical (e.g., being a responsible person) (Koestenbaum 1991:40-42). Koestenbaum then identifies and discusses what he calls *critical success factors.* These represent ***a set of four strategy-tactic intersections that are fundamentally important for achieving leadership greatness***. They are:

- Vision-social: systemic and systems thinking
- Reality-psychological: a relentless results- and market-orientation
- Ethics-professional: commitment to teams and teamwork
- Courage-philosophical: a "centered-ness" (his word) grounded in responsibility, energy, and commitment.

Koestenbaum closes his book with a challenge and a summary:

> In leadership, greatness matters. There are four ways to express greatness. The authentic leader is committed to greatness in all of them. A visionary leader always sees the larger perspective, for *vision* means to think big and new. A realistic leader always responds to the facts, for *realism* means to have no illusions. An ethical leader always is sensitive to people, for *ethics* means to be of service. A courageous leader always claims the power to initiate, act, and risk, for *courage* means to act with sustained initiative.... Take all of this to heart—that managing is teaching, teaching is empowering, and what you teach is the Leadership Diamond model.... Remember, it is not that we have so much to do that we cannot find time to think and act as leaders; on the contrary, it is because we do not think and act as leaders that we have so much to do (Koestenbaum 1991:318,319).

## LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING

Before I present newer literature on learning, I want to draw from older work. It involves, at least for me, rediscovering an "old friend" that has new (not renewed, but new) meaning: finding value that I did not see before. So, let me turn first to the 1980s work of David A. Kolb and to an instrument that emerged from that work, The Learning Styles Inventory.

### David Kolb's Learning Cycle, Learning Styles, and The Learning Style Inventory

As long as I can remember, we have been using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) in conjunction with leadership development programs in Michigan State University Extension. I am a certified MBTI trainer and have facilitated many training sessions over the years. The MBTI is a research-based instrument that operationalizes the work of Carl Jung as adapted and extended by the seminal research of Isabel Briggs Myers and Katherine Cooke Briggs, among others. The MBTI is an example of a typological model, that is, a frame of reference that distributes individuals into categories based on their distinctive characteristics (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991:36). The MBTI distributes individuals based on their personality preferences (Myers and McCaulley, 1986).

*Why do we use the MBTI in our leadership development programs?* I suppose that there are at least two reasons: it can promote self-understanding, which is an important educational goal; and it is a "fun experience," something to which people can relate, as well as learning they can apply immediately. But, what is the *curricular reason* for using the MBTI? Why do we use the MBTI rather than some other typological model measuring personality differences? Why not use a typological instrument measuring something other than personality differences? These questions are rarely, if ever, raised.

However, *if the learning orientation that I propose here makes sense, we might find it useful to supplement, if not replace, the MBTI with an instrument that distributes individuals based on distinctive characteristics associated with learning.* We might then consider drawing upon the work of David Kolb, represented most comprehensively in his 1984 book, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, and using Kolb's Learning-Style Inventory (LSI), what was introduced by Kolb in 1985 and published originally by McBer and Co. (1985) and published today by the HayGroup. Like the MBTI, the LSI is a self-scoring instrument that can be used in classroom and workshop settings.

Kolb's work helps us answer important questions that apply at the individual, team, organizational, and community levels: *What are our preferred modes of learning? What needs to happen for effective learning to occur?* Marylu McEwen of the University of Maryland recently described Kolb's contribution this way:

> Effective learning requires four different kinds of learning abilities that correspond to the four points in the learning cycle: *Concrete Experience (CE) abilities*, *Reflective Observation (RO) abilities*, *Abstract Conceptualization (AC) abilities*, and *Active Experimentation (AE) abilities*. Describing the learning cycle and these four abilities, Kolb states that learners "must: *involve themselves fully and without bias in new experiences* (CE); they must *observe and reflect on those experiences* (RO); they *must create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories* (AC); and they *must use theories to make decisions & solve problems* (AE).
>
> Kolb also presents the learning cycle as: learning *from feeling* (CE), learning *by watching/listening* (RO), learning *by thinking* (CE), and learning *by doing* (AE) (McEwen 1996:69 with emphasis added).

Kolb's work can be used to help individuals and groups better understand their preferred learning orientations and to help them engage in learning that completes the learning cycle. But, all too often, we—as individuals and as groups of people in both organization and community work—are inclined to focus, even fixate, on fewer than the whole range of modes associated with the learning cycle. When this happens, it can be argued that learning is less than robust.

An important tool for measuring learning style is Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (LSI). It is designed to help people understand their strengths and weaknesses as learners, and to track the extent to which they rely on each of the four learning modes that constitute the learning cycle. Results can be used by learners to see their respective "learning patterns" across the four learning modes. To facilitate this learning, learners are distributed across four learning-style types based on their respective LSI scores:

The Converger
- Combines Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation.
- People with this learning style are best at finding practical uses for ideas and theories.

The Diverger
- Combines Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation.
- People with this learning style are best at viewing concrete situations from many different points of view.

The Assimilator
- Combines Abstract Conceptualization and Reflective Observation.
- People with this learning style are best at understanding a wide range of information and putting it to concise, logical form.

The Accommodator
- Combines Concrete Experience and Active Experimentation.
- People with this learning style prefer learning primarily from "hands-on" experience.

(McBer and Co., 1985)

Opportunities abound for applying the LSI in training situations. For example, the instrument could be productively used in action projects, such as those guided by the Community Action Leadership Development (CALD) framework designed for MSU Extension (Vandenberg and Sandmann, 1995). Participants would be able to see their individual and collective learning preferences. Roles and tasks might be undertaken so that each person on a team would be doing what they prefer to do and probably do best. The LSI might also be used as the basis for ensuring that learning at the collective level includes efforts associated with all four learning modes.

## RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS ON LEARNING

In this section, I will share with you my interpretation of two important books published in late 1996. The first is a book by David Noer; the second is by Peter Vaill. Each book serves a different purpose. Noer's book represents a wonderful tool for organization analysis and development. Vaill's contribution lies not so much in what he has written per se, but how others will apply what he recommends. That is because Vaill offers a learning framework that begs to be roundly discussed, operationalized, and, of course, improved.

### Individual and Organizational Learning: David Noer's "Breaking Free"

David Noer's contributions extend our capacity to think about the relevance of learning in our contemporary leadership, organizational, and community practice. Let me also add that I find myself recommending Noer's work, more than any other, to persons who have recently experienced a traumatic organizational or community-related change experience.

Noer, the author of *Healing the Wounds* (1993), was formerly a staff member at The Center for Creative Leadership in North Carolina and now is an honorary senior fellow at the Center. In *Breaking Free: A Prescription for Personal and Organizational Change* (1996), Noer offers "handles" for people who are trying to understand, as well as to cope with, organizational transitions and the fast-paced change associated with organizational life. It is a very readable book that can be applied easily in training. A learning approach permeates what Noer has to offer:

> Breaking free and learning how to learn is a subjective, inside-out, messy process that is at odds with the avowed external, objective reality of the old paradigm. In truth, the flames of personal growth and insight have always been fanned by the internal, subjective winds of the human spirit. The process was just kept in the closet in the old paradigm. Too many organizations are reacting to the future with the mantras of the past, approaching the task with a frenzy of activity. They are pursuing the futile quest for an objective, external tool with a fervor fueled by their need to ensure organizational survival (Noer 1996:11).

**Noer's Four R(Response)-Types**

For Noer, "relief" (as he calls it) comes, as you have read in the quote above, *from the inside-out.* The ingredients are:

- learning how to learn
- insight
- empathy
- coaching, and
- collective learning.

He uses this learning theme to describe *types of responses to organizational change and transitions*. One of Noer's major contributions is that he applies the response types at two levels—individual and organizational. The key variables associated with the response types are *comfort* with change and *capacity* for change. Given these variables, Noer identifies and discusses four individual and organizational response types: the Overwhelmed, the Entrenched, the BSer, and the Learner:

*The Overwhelmed* are persons and types of organizations that exhibit *low comfort* with and *low capacity* for change. Their response pattern is withdrawal and, in so doing, they avoid the learning that is necessary for them to respond effectively. We often feel sadness for people and organizations that are unable to cope with change and transition. Rather than working through the dilemmas they face, the overwhelmed simply step aside, are silent, or quit. It is as if whatever is happening is not worth it. It may not be so much that The Overwhelmed do not care. They often simply do not know how to respond—they are neither comfortable with what they are facing nor capable of dealing with it effectively.

*The Entrenched* are persons and organizations that exhibit a *low comfort* with but *high capacity* for change. They hold on tenaciously to what they have learned in the past and hope, against all hope, that it will serve them well in their "new reality" because it worked before. The problem is obvious, though. When circumstances change, no amount of clinging to the past will probably suffice. They might believe, "If I (or we) just work harder, work longer, or work smarter, then…." This approach rarely works and serves as a replacement for seeking new solutions that apply to the new reality. Ironically, The Entrenched may possess the skills and abilities to make the necessary transition. Unfortunately, they face a challenge of the spirit: feeling comfortable enough to make the necessary changes.

*The BSers* (I wish Noer had used another label) are persons and types of organizations that exhibit *high comfort* with but *low capacity* for change. "Hipshooting" is the dominant behavior. Substance is limited, though, and what appears to be a person or organization that is adapt at change is not. At some point, most BSers—people and organizations—are found out for what they are: long on talk, but correspondingly short on the ability to do anything meaningful with the talk. Ironically, faced with this dilemma, they tend to engage in more talk! Eventually, this "same old, same old" often runs a predicable course: people turn away from superficial, substance-limited analyses and solutions that have ephemeral, if any, value.

*The Learners* are persons and types of organizations that deal positively with change. They have *high comfort* with and *high capacity* for change. They engage the situation—seeking new ways of coping with and solving problems, and gaining personally and interpersonally as they learn new concepts and approaches. Because they have well-developed learning skills, The Learners make the most of their talents. They welcome change, not because they necessarily like it, but because they know how to apply their learning capacity to address the future. Learners are anticipatory, thoughtful, and reflective. They also know when "to let go" of ways of thinking, approaches, and structures that worked well in the past but no longer fit contemporary circumstances.

Trainers will be glad to know that Noer offers simple-to-use tools for assessing individual and organization R (response) types. The ***Organizational R-Type*** instrument is published on pp. 139-141 and the ***Individual R-Type*** instrument can be found on pp. 143-145 of *Breaking Free*. Noer also discusses four response dimensions for each type: *emotional response, behavioral response, learning response,* and *successful survival response*. This discussion is especially helpful because it spans the descriptive, the analytic, and the prescriptive (i.e., how to help). Finally, Noer gives attention to practical considerations in four "What if's": if *you are* one of R-Types, if you *work for or with* one of the R-Types, if one of the R-Types *works for you*, or if you *work in* one of the R-Type environments.

Because so many individuals find themselves *experiencing a poor fit* with their colleagues and their organizational environment, Noer takes his analysis to an important level: *individual and organizational degree-of-fit*. The table on p. 148, "Self-System Response Connections," is a major contribution in this regard. Of significant importance are the off-diagonal cells in the 16-cell matrix (*individual-organization misfit*): overwhelmed-entrenched, overwhelmed-BS, overwhelmed-learning, entrenched-overwhelmed, entrenched-BS, entrenched-learning, BS-overwhelmed, BS-entrenched, BS-learning, learning-overwhelmed, learning-entrenched, and learning-BS.

**Noer's Learning Tactics Model**

Another important contribution made by Noer is his presentation of *The Learning Tactics Model*. The model is "...designed to serve as an integrating frame of reference and help people in organizations understand and made choices concerning the relevance of their learning tactics." The model includes four learning tactics (p. 193):

- *Acting*: Interpreting life through action; trusting activity as a way of knowing; learning by doing

- *Feeling*: Interpreting life though emotions; trusting feelings; and learning by exploring one's own and others' emotions

- *Thinking*: interpreting life through rational analysis; trusting facts; and learning by analyzing and strategizing

- *Accessing others*: interpreting life through input from others; trusting interactions; learning from others.

Noer argues that the learning tactics need to be interpretively applied. First, he believes that we have a preferred learning tactic that has remained constant over time and events; we tend to go through the four tactics in a preferred sequence; we have difficulty breaking away from these preferences; and we can break away from our learning proclivities, but there is often a short-term cost associated with the possibility of gaining longer-term learning pay-offs (Noer 1996:193-195). Second, Noer suggests that we need to appreciate what happens when a learning tactic is used alone or without connection to the other tactics. He identifies 12 of these circumstances on p. 199: acting without thinking, acting without feeling, acting without accessing others, thinking without acting, thinking without feeling, thinking without accessing others, feeling without acting, feeling without thinking, feeling without accessing others, accessing others without acting, accessing others without thinking, and accessing others without feeling. In effect, this analysis provides us with a diagnostic inventory to be drawn upon to better understand and address simple or complex learning-related challenges.

**Implications of Noer's Work for Leadership**

Noer spends a considerable amount of time discussing the implications of his work for leadership. He writes, "Leadership processes will be needed that will result in the development of people who have learned how to learn and organizational systems with the capacity for collective learning." (p. 40) He continues:

> Learners are the primary wielders of the new glue.... In an existential sense, they *are* the adhesive—they hold organizations together. Learners are what separate organizations that will grow and thrive from those that will wither and die. Without a critical mass of people who have the ability to learn from experience, organizations will indeed fall apart (Noer 1996:89).

As I read this quote for the first time, I thought: *Perhaps the most important work in community resource development is to help people and organizations, as Senge wrote in 1990, become "more learning-ful." And, perhaps the greatest challenge of all is to help nonlearning-oriented leaders embrace and practice a learning orientation.* Noer measures the difficulty of the challenge in terms of paradox: "Unfortunately, many of the organizations that need learners the most have organizational climates that drive them out." (p. 111) Yet, Noer argues it is only through what he calls ***liberation leadership*** that organizations will advance in today's and tomorrow's world. In what I consider to be the most eloquent and poignant passage of the book, he writes:

> Organizations of the future will not survive without becoming communities of learning. The learning organization is no academic fad or consultant's buzzword. It is absolutely essential for organizations to learn from their environments, to continually adjust to new and changing data, and, just as is the case with the individual, to learn how to learn from an uncertain and unpredictable future. Leadership competencies include the ability to stimulate and engage in a true collective dialogue. This requires the courage and discipline to go against the grain of cowboy fix-it-and-ride-out-of-town expectations. Leaders must have the patience to refrain from taking individual action until the community reformats and redirects the issues. It also requires faith that collective problem-solving and learning will, in the long-term, be better than the traditional cowboy style. Leadership at this level is captured in three very powerful words: *courage, discipline, and faith* (Noer 1996:176).

## Beyond Learning as Doing: Vaill's, "Learning as a Way of Being"

Peter Vaill offers us a way of thinking that takes learning—individually and collectively—to a new and higher level. To offer that individuals, organizations, and communities of the 21st Century must be dedicated to learning, is one thing. To help us understand *what* that entails and *how* we might meet the challenge, is quite another thing. Although I feel that Vaill's *Learning as a Way of Being: Strategies for Survival in a World of Permanent White Water* (1996) is uneven in terms of quality and contributions, the first part of the book is first-rate in my estimation.

**Vaill's Definitions of Learning, Organizational Learning, and the Learning Organization**

One of the first things Vaill does is to offer definitions of *learning, organizational (community) learning*, and *learning organization* (community). Let me share with you what he has to say:

> *Learning* obviously often involves acquiring the ability to do something—an ability that we often describe as possessing *know-how*. But, in humans, learning has to be more than that. Separately from know-how, we also are able to develop over time a fuller understanding of a subject in and of itself, even when we do not possess a high degree of its relevant skill component. In other words, we can grow in our *know-what*, whether or not we also grow in our know-how. Beyond know-how and know-what, we can grow in our understanding of the meaning and value of the subject or activity. This is what we call our *know-why*. We need to understand human learning in terms of all three dimensions: know-how, know-what, and know-why. They are related to each other, but they do not have to move in lock-step: a change in one does not automatically cause a change in the other two. Accordingly, I define learning as follows:
> *learning...[involves]...the changes a person makes in himself or herself that increase the know-why and/or know-what and/or know-how the person possesses with respect to a given subject....*
>
> *Organizational...[or community]...learning* is learning that goes on inside of an organization...[or community], usually the learning of an individual but also the learning of pairs or teams of people. *The organizational...[or community]...learning movement is thus occupied with questions of the nature of learning in...environments...and with what...leaders...can do to enhance learning processes....*
>
> The *learning organization...[or community]...is* certainly a place where high-quality learning goes on. But a lot more than this is being signaled by the switching of noun and adjective. *The learning organization...[or community]...is a different kind of social*

> *system*.... The learning organization...[community]...is not grudgingly and creakily lurching from one stable state to the next as the world around it changes. Because it is constantly learning, it is "beyond the stable state." *The learning organization in contemporary vision has achieved a new kind of internal structure and process marked by imaginative flexibility of style in its leadership and by empowered contributions from its membership.* It is constituted to learn and grow and change—as opposed to traditional bureaucratic models constituted to be stable and predictable in their operation, to hold the line and not to change (Vaill 1996:21,52,53).

**Learning as a Way of Being Versus "Institutionalized Learning"**

It is against this background that Vaill argues that the predominant approaches to learning—formal schooling and learning as it takes place in some organizational and community settings—is not learning at all. What he calls ***institutional learning*** is "...so thoroughly dominat(ed)..by standards of the system...that it...*is as much a system of indoctrination and control as it is a system for learning*." (p. 40). Therein lies the challenge, according to Vaill. That is, the system of learning as offered and organized by the dominant paradigm and powers associated with it is not appropriate—neither in philosophy nor in practice—for permanent white water conditions. Those in control, at a time when they *should* be doing what Noer proclaims as "breaking free," often do just the opposite*: they may use their positions of authority to manifest their "nervousness" and to argue that "the new ways" are causing great stress "on the system."* "Cease and desist orders" often follow—orders that are connected clearly to power and control. Heed them or suffer the consequences is the choice facing those in the reporting line.

The reality, according to Vaill, is that we should almost expect this behavior. It represents "holding on" in an environment that is quickly changing, where what worked before will probably not work now and certainly will not work in the future. Why? We are at the edge of a paradigm shift. This shift, as always, represents a change *in kind*, <u>not</u> *of degree*—that is, a change of significant, not limited, proportions. The shift, as always, has pragmatic roots:

> The problem is to envision what learning can be, how it can go on given that the traditional paradigm for conducting business is not designed for the task and in many ways inadequate under contemporary conditions. We have to learn what learning in permanent white water can be (Vaill, 1996:41).

**The Socio-emotional and Spiritual Contributions of Learning as a Way of Being**

Learning as a way of being also addresses a malaise that, unfortunately, exists in some organizations and communities—a feeling of confusion, a loss of direction, and a sense of meaninglessness just at a time when *focus, purpose, and meaningfulness are becoming more important to many people*. Consequently, learning as a way of being for Vaill is not about "grabbing a tool" that can help us survive permanent white water. It is about capturing a wholeness that we have lost and wish to recapture or about experiencing something that we never felt but want to feel very much:

> In the phrase, learning as a way of being, being refers to the *whole person*—to something that goes on all the time and that extends into all aspects of a person's life.... More than just a skill, learning as a way of being is a whole posture toward experience, a way of framing or interpreting all experiences as a learning opportunity or learning process (Vaill 1996:43,51).

All of this reminds me of what Dee Hock (1994) offers in his *chaordic theory.* Chaordic is a manufactured word with *cha* coming from the word "chaos" and *ord* coming from the word "order." In the chaordic organization (or community or, indeed, life), purpose and operating principles are paramount. How things are done <u>never</u> rival purpose and principles for central standing, and multiple ways of doing things are encouraged. Contrast this with the way that many contemporary organizations and organizations operate: they may not always be clear about vision or direction, but they often obsess over methods, sometimes seeking ways to homogenize activities so as to manage them more easily.

Because of this reality, I have come to loathe a phrase that I started using several years ago—*under-led and over-managed organizations and communities*. I loathe it because I see it all too often. These are places that have elevated management responsibilities to leadership status. When "running a tight ship" becomes more important than knowing where the ship is headed, trouble lies ahead; methods and means have become more important than purpose and principles.

Under-led and over-managed organizations and communities tend to be "soul-less" places—places without a significant sense of who they are, why they are, and what might make them unique. Hock might argue: "Flip over the coin" and refrain from trying to control the means. Focus instead on what you seek to be and why. But so many contemporary organizations and communities are silent on the what and why! No amount of how-related activity (what I call activity-driven, "imaging," and "busy-ness") can overcome this. All persons, organizations, and communities **MUST** answer the questions: *Who am I? What do I seek to be? Why?* These questions once answered, of course, are not answered for all time. There is a life to live and a life from which to learn. In Vaillian terms, we must have the *courage to learn as a way of being.*

**Vaill's Seven Qualities of Learning as Way of Being**

The heart of Vaill's contribution is the identification, definition, and interplay among seven qualities of learning as a way of being (Vaill, 1996: 44-47, 56-100). They are:

- self-directed learning
- creative learning
- expressive learning
- feeling learning
- on-line learning
- continual learning, and
- reflexive learning.

These seven learning qualities are selected because they are not the focus of attention in institutionalized learning, but are required in a white water environment (p. 44). Just as important to Vaill are the dynamics among the seven qualities:

> These seven qualities may be thought of as the individual notes out of which learning as a way of being becomes a variety of chords and intricate melodies.... The challenge is to...imagine how these seven notes can interweave and enrich each other in our learning and in the learning of managerial leaders. Each of the seven signals a kind of emphasis or a flavor to learning that is very important and in danger of getting lost in white water (Vaill 1996:56).

*Self-directed learning* means just what it says: the learner directs the learning—what is learned, how, and when. At issue here, fundamentally, is *who controls* the learning content, process, and pace. It is the learner, of course. But, just as important is the *responsibility* that comes with this control—responsibility to be a conscientious learner. In other words, the freedom to control learning has consequences. Thus, with self-directed learning, we need to think about the concept of *learning accountability* in new ways.

*Creative learning* conveys the fact that, in permanent white water conditions, solutions to problems must be *creative and inventive*. Creative learning means pushing the boundaries of learning so that *learners face problems that they have not seen before*—problems that require new solutions, not old ones. This means *learning may be stressful, discomforting, and even painful.* At the same time, creative learning can be full of surprises—learning that you can solve what first appears to be an unsolvable problem or discovering that you do not know as much as you thought you did. Because of these surprises, creative learning resides in places that we often avoid—the unknown and the unpredictable. It is fair to say that creative learning challenges us personally as much as it does intellectually.

*Expressive learning* helps reverse what happens in conventional learning situations. Much of the time institutional learning has us "doing after learning." Internships, for example, are frequently undertaken only after some one in authority believes that the student has learned sufficiently in order "to do." Enter expressive learning, what Vaill calls "bone-deep learning." It is that Saturday at "the Y" when we were tossed into the pool—sink or swim. Expressive learning is inherently experiential, full of meaning—*personal* meaning. Consequently, perhaps the best way to initiate a learning episode is to "just do it." Approaching learning in this way means that it is immersed in "I" or "we," as a learner or a group of learners addresses a task and the overarching learning situation. Expressive learning is a powerful way to *connect knower and known* inextricably.

*Feeling learning* counters the reality that most learning situations are framed for us as *cognitive* activities—things that go on in, and happen to, the mind. How often, though, have we *suppressed our feelings about learning?* We felt stupid because we were not "getting it." We felt foolish about sharing with others our feelings about a learning experience. If *learning is about meaning*, which it is, and if *learning is about sense-making*, which it also is, then WHY do we go out of our way to *separate what we think* from *how we feel* about learning and the learning experience? Yet, we have made this separation a fundamental feature of institutional learning. We know from research that *how we feel often contributes to the learning that we retain* (Goleman, 1995). This suggests that "knowing" should not be defined restrictively in cognitive terms. It may well be that some of the most important "knowing that matters" is *learning* that *flows through the emotions.*

*On-line learning* means learning that takes place as we engage in a role. It is a joke to many of us in academe: administrators sent off to a Harvard seminar to learn "how to be a dean" or new chairpersons sent to some other far-away place to attend lectures about how to be an exemplary chairperson. Somehow, some way, these people are supposed to "get it," come back, and be good at their jobs. These are examples of *out-of-context learning episodes* that do *not occur in real-time.* Certainly there are some advantages to this approach (e.g., it gives people a chance to be stimulated by new ideas and new people). However, in-context, real-time learning is *role-rich.* Out-of-context and nonreal-time learning may be full of *knowledge* but, may be weak on *learning.*

*Continual learning* is required if we seek to master a subject. That requires *constant learning.* There is a beginning to learning that leads to increasing mastery. The problem is that continual learning is often undertaken unsystematically and without rigor. Having experts organize learning experiences for us is not the answer. That takes us, the learner, out of the equation. Indeed, many colleges and universities are trying to *increase* the number of electives for undergraduate students, not provide more restrictive majors that have all students marching down the path to graduation in lock-step style. So, what is the answer? The answer, perhaps, is to *stimulate and make possible the type of learning that helps learner's gain increasing capacity over time.*

*Reflexive learning* addresses an extremely important topic. Learning "it" almost always involves learning about a subject *other than learning.* Reflexivity, on the other hand, is *learning about learning* as well as becoming *more perceptive about ourselves as learners.* Important questions are: *How and when do I learn best? How and when do I learn the least? When do I most enjoy learning? When do I tend to view learning as a "turn-off"?* If we asked and answered these questions, and then applied the learning to the other six qualities of learning, my sense is that what we learn, how we learn, when we learn, and from whom we learn might look very different. Vaill believes, as I do, that *reflexivity is the linchpin of learning as a way of being. Reflexivity includes, but goes far beyond, reflective learning.* Reflection is an important mode of learning, but it is learning associated with sense making. Reflexivity involves *noticing oneself*—the way we learn and why.

**Applying Vaill**

I would like to see Vaill's framework used for *designing community and organizational leadership development programs*. I would also like to see leaders of nonprofit, public, and private sector organizations use the framework as the basis for *improving individual and organizational learning processes and levels*. We need to find out whether experiences like these help advance our capacity to stimulate individual and collective learning. Also, if we accept Vaill's criticism of institutional learning, then his framework could form the basis for *designing and testing learning experiments at the collegiate level with undergraduate, graduate, and professional students*. If higher education is more than helping learners enhance their cognitive abilities and skills, then the "whole person" approach recommend by Vaill might be used productively to promote "whole-student development."

## CLOSING COMMENTS: EXPLORATIONS INTO "THE BACK AND FORTH"

I hope that I have given you food for thought and for potential practice. *What do you do with this material?* One option is to do nothing. Another option is to use this paper as a staging ground for learning and action, deciding what you want to explore next and how.

All I have tried to do here is share with you some of the readings and interpretations that are important to me. There is a "back and forth" associated with scholarly practice that I hope is evident in this paper. That back and forth involves establishing meaningful ways to connect reading, practicing, discussing, and reflecting. It is all about getting ready for practice, engaging in practice, and making sense out of practice experiences. The "back and forth" of my scholarly practice somehow brought me to Senge, to the other literature that I discussed here and, most importantly, to my practice-related interpretations of this material.

How each of us engages in our "back and forth" helps define our professional identity and contributes enormously to how each of us views ourselves professionally—our "professional self," so to speak. So, think about how you go about your "back and forth." Then, use this paper to enhance your capacity as community resource developers to make a difference in peoples' lives.

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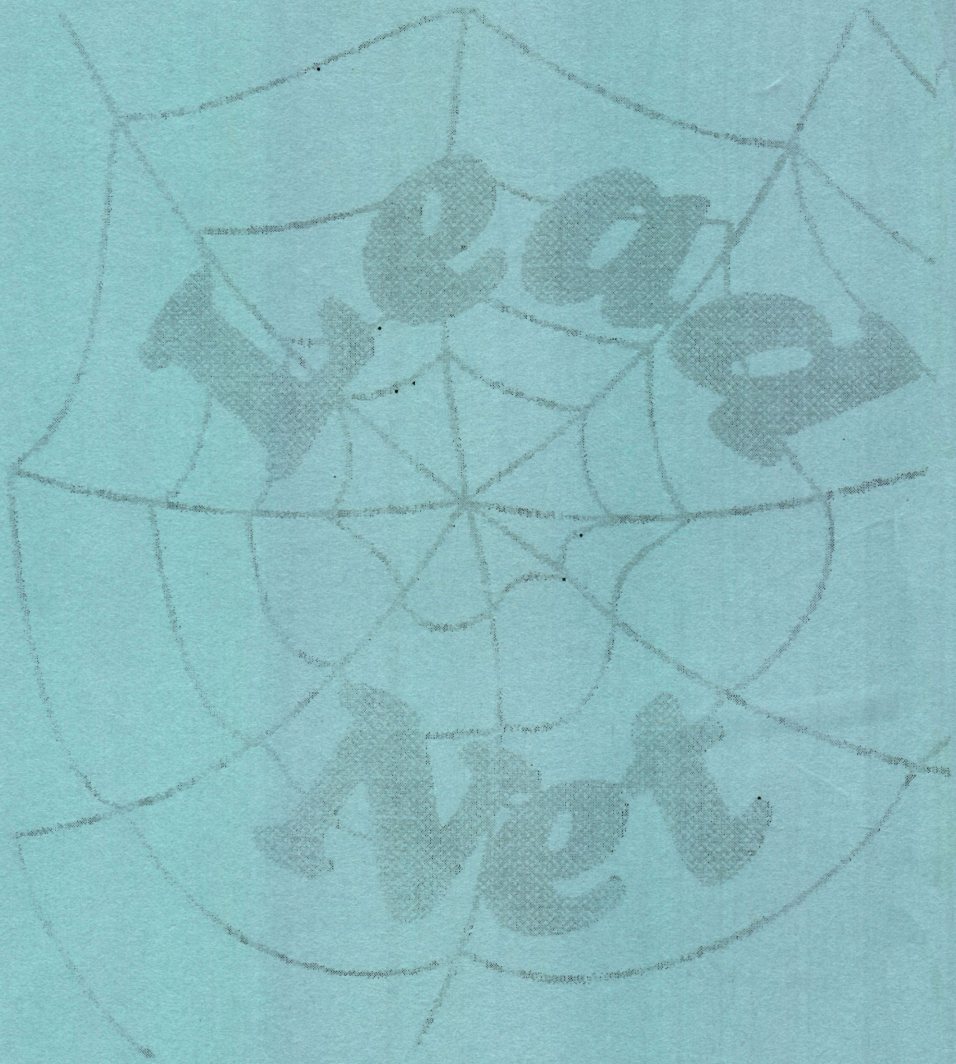


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