

**LEADING VOLUNTEERS:  
POWER RELATIONS AND VALUES IN ORGANIZATIONS**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis sheds new light on internal dynamics of nonprofit associations – nonprofit organizations reliant on significant volunteer participation. It represents one of the first research efforts to deal with power relations and the paradoxical, conflictual nature of values in the context of leading volunteers in nonprofit associations.

This thesis mounts a significant challenge to the widely accepted nonprofit management literature which is firmly grounded in the systems thinking tradition and which contends values serve only positive purposes and leaders must ensure there is little contention over values. While this research affirms the benefits of values in attracting volunteers and enabling coordinated action among volunteers, it also argues strongly that such a single-minded focus is a severe handicap to organizations interested in change and adaptation. This is because conflict and difference are essential in the change process.

Another limitation of the orthodox literature is the portrayal of a leader's power position relative to volunteers as one of significant dependency. This research concludes that the relationship is characterized by significant interdependency. Such a conclusion is based on the tendency for volunteers to imagine an ideal future achieved by joining in mutual action with others. Because volunteers need support and participation by leaders in the realization of this better future, a dependency is created. This different way of understanding values and power opens up a broader role for nonprofit executives. Not only must they work with volunteers to enable the productive dimensions of values to be realized, but they must work with the paradoxical nature of values and the inevitable conflicts and anxiety which emerge. By paying attention to daily patterns of interaction, resisting tendencies to deny or deflect conflicts, noticing how one participates in conversations and whether the results are repetitive or free-flowing and creative, nonprofit association leaders can help create more adaptable and changeable organizations.

These findings were informed by an intensive examination of my experiences as a leader in a nonprofit association and of complex responsive processes theory of Stacey and colleagues, complexity science, and the scholarship of sociologist Norbert Elias. They emerged from a series of narratives about my experiences, serious reflections on these

narratives within the doctoral program community, and study of literature suggested by themes that arose in the course of the research.

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## INTRODUCTION

My research inquiry involved the illumination of internal dynamics in nonprofit associations (nonprofit organizations reliant on volunteers for their existence and operation), particularly as they relate to values, power relationships and the leadership of volunteers. This research partially answers the call by many for more serious study of these organizations, a call trumpeted by Lester Salamon, a nationally renowned scholar of nonprofits. “Few aspects of American society are as poorly understood or as obscured by mythology as the thousands of...organizations that comprise America’s private, nonprofit sector” (Salamon, 1999, p. 7).

The importance of this sector throughout the world is being increasingly recognized. Now called the “third sector”, it is acknowledged for fostering many important social movements and for affecting citizens and states around the globe. Yet, little is known about the nature of these organizations and their management. When one searches for serious writing on the internal dynamics of nonprofit associations and the leadership of volunteers, one soon realizes that omissions are especially glaring. What is written about values emphasizes their positive benefits. They lead to the creation of nonprofit associations and the attraction of volunteers while enabling coordination within the organizations. Executives are advised to minimize and manage conflict around values to insure that core values are protected and the commitment of volunteers is sustained. In doing so executives are reminded of their dependency on volunteers for the survival of the organization and advised to adopt management approaches that stress participation and engagement in decision making. Underneath this advice is the assumption nonprofit association leaders have little power. Much of this guidance about management of nonprofit associations, I conclude, is *incomplete, at times misleading, and sometimes incorrect*.

In this thesis it is demonstrated this way of thinking can and has led, in the case of the organization featured in this research, to a value and pattern of interacting that severely hinders the expression of difference. By examining alternative literature from complexity science, complex responsive processes theory, sociology, social psychology and reflecting seriously on detailed organizational narratives, it is shown that conflict is inherent in the everyday work of organizations, due in large measure to the paradoxical

nature of values. Such conflict, expressed in routine, ordinary conversations, is revealed as essential to an organization's ability to change and adapt. Concurrently, it is demonstrated that nonprofit executives are not as dependent on volunteers as the orthodox literature purports. This stems from the observation that what draws volunteers together around an organizational cause is an idealization, a belief that together a socially desirable future can be achieved. The possibility of realizing this imagined future depends on the support and engagement of association executives, thus introducing an *interdependent* quality to the relationship between volunteers and leaders.

Such awareness, along with recognition of the essential role of difference in organizational vitality, opens up new avenues of action for nonprofit association leaders not anticipated in the conventional literature. I came to see association executives' responsibilities in an expanded light. Not only must they help volunteers express their values and acknowledge their efforts to do so, but simultaneously they must recognize the limitations of such strategies. The expanded role envisions leaders who draw out and explore difference and paradox, resist ingrained tendencies to quell the exploration of conflict, and avoid participating in conversations in ways that help sustain repetitive, stuck patterns. Such actions, which inevitably involve threats to established values, identity and power positions of volunteers and staff, introduce the issue of anxiety into the dynamics. Working with anxiety and the unknowable consequences of unsettling moves are thus suggested as additional skills for the effective nonprofit executive to develop and for students of nonprofit associations to explore.

The way of understanding life in nonprofit associations was inspired by the theory of *complex responsive processes* proposed by Stacey, Griffin, and Shaw (Griffin, 2002; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2001; Stacey, 2003a; Stacey, 2003b; Stacey, 2005; Stacey, 2007; Stacey & Griffin, 2005; Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2000). In developing this theory, they drew on insights from Mead (Mead, 1934), Elias (Elias, 1998; Elias, 1970; Elias, 1991; Elias, 2000; Elias & Scotson, 1994; Elias, 1987), and the science of complexity. As shown through my research, this theory is much more consonant with the organizational experiences recounted in this thesis than the more systemic-based thinking which pervades much of the mainstream management writing on nonprofit associations.



The research methods underpinning the doctor of management program undoubtedly contributed to the findings reported in this thesis and to changes in my leadership practices. These methods used narratives from one's organizational experience and a reflexive orientation towards these experiences, approached in a radically social manner. This involved intensive interaction among students and faculty, in small and large groups, and an iterative, emergent approach to writing and research informed by intensive feedback from faculty and classmates and analysis of mainstream organizational and alternative literature. Such methods inevitably generated conflict, shifting power differentials, involved values, and raised anxiety, providing another organizational experience from which I drew in making sense of the narratives central to this thesis. This approach to research, heavily informed by complex responsive processes theory, represents a novel approach to studying dynamics in nonprofit associations and is an additional contribution to the literature.

I have chosen to present this research in the order in which it was undertaken. This is being done so the reader can trace the emergent nature of the research and how my thinking and practice developed over the course of the doctoral program. The only changes made to the four primary projects, which along with the Synopsis and Critical Appraisal form this thesis, were to remove extraneous detail, make editorial and grammatical improvements, and change names to provide anonymity. The substance of each project remains as originally written. Such a strategy was advocated by Norbert Elias.

It is hard not to believe that if the development of more comprehensive, later solutions to a problem is reconstructed by documenting the different states of research, access to the later stages of the solution will be easier. By being able to think through the limited earlier solutions the reader is spared the difficulty of trying to understand the later ideas as if they had emerged from nowhere, without prior reflection, in the head of a particular person.

(Elias, 1991, p. ix)

**Project One** traces the development of my understanding of organizational dynamics and my management practice prior to entering the doctoral program. I uncovered my

tendency as a manager to play a whole system designer role and the strong systems thinking orientation on which this tendency was based.

**Project Two** stemmed from a desire to move beyond this designer and system orientation to one focused on everyday interactions. The relationship I had with one employee, in the context of a performance evaluation process, provided the central narrative for this project. Insights which emerged from the research had to do with the central role played by shifting power dynamics in routine working relationships.

**Project Three** concerned a more complex relationship issue involving the multiple individuals who serve as trustees of a nonprofit association. Patterns of interaction were examined in light of the organization's efforts to move beyond start-up and the conventional life cycle management literature on small firm growth. The research revealed the influence of patterns of interaction among trustees on the organization's ability to adapt and grow.

A limitation in a pattern of interacting among the trustees found in Project Three, a pattern I termed "appreciative and conflict-free", led to the themes for **Project Four**. In this research, the paradoxical nature of values was explored. How conflict that arises from paradox was dealt with was found to be essential to change.

The **Synopsis and Critical Appraisal** draws together and extends research on key themes – values, power relations and the leadership of volunteers – which emerged in the preceding projects. Contributions to the literature from this research speak to the deep interdependence between volunteers and executives, how values are sustained and changed through everyday interactions, and an expanded role of the nonprofit leader in affecting these interactions.

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## PROJECT ONE

### **From Factory to Designer to....**

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*We live in a world that is becoming increasingly complex.  
Unfortunately, our style of thinking rarely matches this complexity.*

(Morgan, 1986, p. 16)

#### *A Backseat Experience*

The first time I remember thinking it mattered how one understood organizations was during a summer spent putting springs in the backseats of Chevrolets. I was seventeen at the time, holding my first job in corporate America in a General Motors (GM) assembly plant.

After a few weeks on the job getting acclimated to the steady rhythm of the assembly line and gaining some experience fitting springs into backseat frames, I learned to how to get ahead of the assembly line. This enabled me to stockpile some completed seats and to use the free time to read a book or listen to some music. It was not too long after I discovered this means of relieving the unrelenting boredom of work that I was visited by a United Auto Workers Union (UAW) steward. This practice, I was told in no uncertain terms, had to stop. What if GM management discovered that I could work faster than the line?

This little episode was emblematic of life in the plant. General Motors and the UAW seemed to be engaged in a minor war. There was literally no conversation between assembly line workers and plant managers. That fall I headed off promising myself I would never begrudge assembly line workers good salaries and committed to finishing college so I could find more satisfying work.

In one of my early college courses I came across my first management text, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (Taylor, 1947) and thought here was a set of ideas to help me make some sense of my summer of car building.

The development of a science...involves the establishment of many rules, laws, and formulae which replace the judgment of the individual workman and which can be effectively used only after having been systematically recorded, indexed, etc...The work of every workman is fully planned out by the management at least one day in advance, and each man receives in most cases complete instructions, describing in detail the task which he is to accomplish...

(Taylor 1947, pp. 28-29)

Here, I thought was the way of thinking that guided life in the GM assembly plant and led to a real separation between the roles of workers and managers. Thinking was the job of planners and managers; following instructions the job of workers. Being uncomfortable with this view of workers as automatons, I found myself attracted to the work of Abraham Maslow and his hierarchy of needs framework presented in *Toward a Psychology of Being* (Maslow, 1968). Maslow, it seemed to me appreciated that meaningful life and work required more than the “following instructions” ways of working advocated by Taylor.

### *Pursuing New Ideas*

My first job after earning a master’s degree was as an administrator at Elizabeth General Medical Center, Elizabeth. This was an exciting period in my working life. I found myself in the 1970s a member of an unusually effective management team. I took an interest in planning. During this era in healthcare management, planning was primarily associated with facilities. This primary focus on buildings seemed awfully narrow to me. I wondered:

- Should not facility plans be based on the role and future direction of the hospital?
- How is it that these plans should be developed?

- Should those doing the “real work” in the hospital - physicians and nurses - join members of senior management and the board of trustees and have a say in the plans for the hospital?

With these questions swirling through my mind and with support from the CEO for doing something beyond master facility planning, I spent a summer reading *furiously*. I also went searching for a healthcare consultant who thought about planning in more than facility terms and was interested in the human aspects of planning. After some detective work I found my way to Fred B. Webber, a Harvard Business School trained independent consultant full of intriguing and different ideas. Together, we designed a new process for planning.

Certain aspects of our design were recognized at the time as good, modern planning practice. They were analytical and fact driven: studying hospital utilization and market share trends and dissecting local health statistics. Other aspects of our approach were more unconventional. Of most significance was the matter of participation. In those days in the hospital field important planning work was done by senior executives. Resulting recommendations were provided to the institution’s board of trustees for review and ratification. The approach Fred Webber and I conceived was different. We formed a planning committee comprised of hospital trustees, physicians who held formal medical staff positions, young up-and-coming physicians who were considered informal leaders, community representatives, members of senior management, and several nurses. Two-day working retreats away from the hospital were the norm. We used large and small group processes and mixed up small groups to foster interaction among people who traditionally did not interact much.

I recall going into these first few of these planning retreats feeling anxious. The approach was new and unproven in the organization. I was not quite sure what would happen, some people were a bit skeptical of the process, and here I was the chief internal proponent of this novel, untried process. I can remember being asked by the CEO before the first retreat what the outcomes would be achieved. “Honestly, I am not sure, but I think they will be worthwhile,” came my reply. He accepted this answer and allowed things to proceed.

As Fred Webber and I planned this process we had several concepts in mind.

- By involving a diverse group of participants we could tap into more information and experience about healthcare needs and services than were available to the senior managers.
- Broad involvement by leaders, formal and informal, from throughout the organization would facilitate implementation of plans because many of the planning committee members would, by virtue of their roles, be involved in carrying out the plans.

After the completion of the retreat we then took the results and arrayed them in a conventional format, thus creating the hospital's long-range plan. We had overarching goals, specific objectives, measures and guiding beliefs.

I see upon reflection that what we were doing represented a mixture of conventional, scientifically-based management ala Frederick Taylor (carefully controlled planning involving study, analysis of data, prescription of implementation steps, measurement and control) and something new focused on participation, diversity, and openness to unforeseen possibilities. At the time, it simply seemed like one worthwhile, internally consistent approach. Little did I realize that what was underneath our approach was a variety of theoretical perspectives, from the machine metaphor of scientific management, to the cybernetic branch of systems thinking (Ashby, 1956), hard systems thinking (Checkland, 1981), and second order systems thinking (Bateson, 1972).

Following ten years at Elizabeth General, I helped found and became the first president of CHA (Community Hospitals of America) of New Jersey, a network of nineteen hospitals. This position provided me discretion to pursue management and healthcare ideas I saw as promising. During this period, the 1980s, I became interested in total quality management and the work of its well known proponents (Crosby, 1979; Deming, 1982; Juran, 1974). My attention turned to introducing modern quality improvement approaches pioneered in business organizations like 3M to CHA of New Jersey member hospitals. I promoted the use of techniques such as statistical process control, root cause analysis, process mapping and concepts such as the elimination of variation. This was

another exciting time in my career. I was working with new ideas, introducing new concepts into healthcare.

After several years of intensive effort, I noticed several disquieting signs. Some hospitals were making real strides in introducing quality improvement concepts; other hospitals were struggling. In many hospitals progress was being made in some departments and not others. I wondered if key steps or concepts were missing in the quality improvement regime? Could differences between hospitals and between departments within hospitals explain the inconsistent results? Why, after achieving noticeable gains, did some people revert back to behavior that produced less than optimal results?

During this period of questioning I held a planning retreat with the staff of CHA of New Jersey. Fred Webber served as my companion in planning and facilitating this event. My memory of this event, which occurred in 1995, is quite vivid. Fred's behavior was very uncharacteristic. He was confrontational and aggressive. Normally, Fred attended solely to the process, never voicing an opinion. This time he was saying things like:

- “CHA of New Jersey is in danger of becoming irrelevant, just like its member hospitals!” and
- “The healthcare system is broken, you have to change!”

At the time I did not know what to make of his behavior and statements. Why was Fred behaving this way? I found Fred could not really articulate an underlying rationale. This was deeply unsettling. I had come to trust Fred, his judgment, and his keen sense for what was on the horizon in management thinking.

This experience happened at a time when the pace of change in healthcare in the US was rapidly accelerating. Stimulated by Fred's challenge and what several hospital executives in CHA of New Jersey and I believed to be simplistic responses by hospital leaders to assure the future viability of their institutions, I led a wide search for new ways of thinking about organizations, management, and change. Informed by Everett Rogers' book *Diffusion of Innovation* (Rogers, 1983), I invited fifteen “early adopter” hospital CEOs, medical directors, and nursing executives to join in the search. We went looking for promising new ideas about how systems change and evolve and what could be

learned from fields such as biology, mathematics, sociology, economics, and ecology. Fred and I were reading a lot and reading widely. Among our favorites were: *The Diversity of Life* (Wilson, 1992), *Wrinkles in Time* (Smoot & Davidson, 1993), *The Evolution of Cooperation* (Axelrod, 1984), *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Weick, 1995), *Fractals: The Patterns of Chaos* (Briggs, 1992), *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems and the Economic World* (Kelly, 1994), and *At Home in the Universe: The Search for the Laws of Self-Organization and Complexity* (Kauffman, 1995).

### *Sensing Patterns*

After feeling somewhat lost and confused by our explorations and readings, some in our little band of explorers began to see some patterns. We noticed that discoveries about system behavior from a wide range of disparate disciplines were remarkably similar. Order and disorder seemed to be partners. Diversity and variability were seen as keys to change. Nonlinear dynamics were ubiquitous. Relationships, interactions, and networks, not parts, seemed to be central to behavior. Could it be that we were witnessing the discovery of some universal principles of living systems, we asked?

By now some signs were starting to point to the young science of complexity and the work being done at the Santa Fe Institute. We came across the books *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (Waldrop, 1992) and *Complexity: Life at the Edge of Chaos* (Lewin, 1992). Fred, several members of the “early adopter” group, and I visited Santa Fe and met leading scientists like John Holland, Murray Gell-Mann, and Stuart Kauffman. The conversations were *unbelievably* stimulating.

While driving to the airport after one of these visits, a flood of ideas washed over me. It struck me that like many systems studied by complexity scientists, hospitals too were complex systems. If we could only come to understand them as such and develop leadership practices in line with complexity principles, we could greatly enhance the health of these organizations and the care they provide patients. Complexity, I thought, could help explain the uneven results I had seen in quality improvement and why strategies adopted by hospitals to deal with changes in healthcare almost never panned out as intended. Perhaps complexity science could also open up new insights into human



physiology and trigger significant advances in medicine. I was trying to scribble notes on this stream of insights as I drove along in the dark. One of my last notes said I *had* to find a way to devote my career to bringing complexity science insights into healthcare. When I arrived at the airport I waited until a decent hour to call my wife, told her of my dream and asked if she wanted to move to Santa Fe. “What, are you crazy?” she exclaimed.

Soon after this experience I pulled out a dog-eared copy of my favorite management text, *Images of Organization*, by the prominent sociologist and organizational theorist Gareth Morgan (Morgan, 1986). I was struck that in this 1986 book complexity, self-organization, and emergence were explored. I was amazed that Morgan had appreciated this development in science so early and seen its relevance to management. Wondering if other management writers had addressed complexity, I went looking and found a couple more books: *The Unshackled Organization: Facing the Challenge of Unpredictability Through Spontaneous Reorganization* (Goldstein, 1994) and *Managing the Unknowable: Strategic Boundaries Between Order and Chaos in Organizations* (Stacey, 1992).

This reading helped me become aware of the generally unseen power of scientific theories for how we understand things in Western society and how they shape management practices and organizational theories. Prior to this my interest had been at the “interesting management idea” level. My curiosity had not taken me deeper. But now I began to appreciate how complexity science could help me grasp more fully what was happening in organizations and make greater sense of previous experiences in hospitals. The mixed results of quality improvement were better understood by appreciating the nonlinear and unpredictable nature of complex systems. The novel strategies that emerged in the planning work Elizabeth General were understood as examples of emergence. The science helped me let go of the notion of leaders as controllers of predictable linear processes and view organizations as systems whose behavior was governed in a self-organizing manner by interactions. I came to envision my role, and the role of leaders, as being dedicated to creating conditions for healthy interactions at group and organizational levels. This was the common message I embraced from organizational scholars who led the way in introducing complexity concepts into management thinking. They spoke of “setting up appropriate conditions” (Goldstein, 1994, p. 172), designing actions at the organizational level (Stacey, 1992), creating “*contexts in which*

*appropriate forms of self-organization occur”* (Morgan, 1997, p. 267). They shared a view of organizations as *nonlinear systems*.

A belief began to grow in me that the advance in science represented by complexity presaged an advance in organizational theory and management that could provide me with a set of concepts and approaches for fostering creativity in organizations.

### *Designing Processes, Again*

At this time in my career senior leaders of Community Hospitals of America (CHA) asked if I would accept a new position responsible for developing new management practices inspired by complexity. I eagerly took up this position as it allowed me to devote myself full-time to complexity studies. Quickly I expanded our initial explorer group to include others from across CHA. I also worked diligently with the organizational theorist Brenda Zimmerman and consultant Paul Plsek to coauthor a book on complexity science which proposed management principles “consistent with an understanding of organizations as complex adaptive systems” (Zimmerman, Lindberg, & Plsek, 1998, p. 23).

In an effort to deepen our insights into complex systems and management, Fred Webber and I worked to embody concepts from complexity in how we approached learning activities with our band of “early adopters”. We thought a lot about how to create the conditions for self-organization in our learning sessions and the overall learning process. We had in mind several control parameters, those factors which affect self-organization stressed by Ralph Stacey (Stacey, 1996) and Stuart Kauffman (Kauffman, 1995): the degree of connection; the rate of information flow; and the diversity of the agents in the system. Thus, we:

- sought participation by a diverse group of healthcare professionals;
- fostered ongoing conversations and relationships among the participants and the complexity scientists; and
- built relationships with a variety of complexity scientists and organizational theorists with an interest in complexity.

In all of this learning work I had in mind a clear distinction between facilitator and participant. Many times I wished I could have been a full participant in the learning, but felt it was not possible to attend fully to both roles. I faced a similar dilemma in my planning work at Elizabeth General. My strong attachment to this role and my attention to conditions come through in a note I wrote in my journal in August 1997.

During the practice periods during the workshop the metaphor of a certain pine cone native to the Pine Barrens of New Jersey came to me. How it releases its seeds only under the right conditions – a moderate fire I think. Too low a temperature and the pine cone will not open and release its seeds. Too hot and the fire will destroy the pine cones and the pine trees. No fire – no release of seeds and no contribution to the fertility of the soil. In organizations the right temperature and nutrient rich soil might translate into the right conditions for little ideas to come to the fore, be nurtured and grow.

Another favorite metaphor that held currency with me was that of a farmer or gardener. In the learning sessions I organized we would regularly recite a saying Gareth Morgan shared in some of his presentations: “Farmers don’t grow crops, they create conditions for crops to grow.” As I edited the first draft of this paper, I saw this perspective shared some similarities with Frederick Taylor’s. His attention was directed to designing and controlling tasks. Like the “unbiased scientist”, he observed the work and the workers from the outside and applied prescriptions to control performance (Taylor, 1947). While our attention was not aimed at dictating work processes, it was directed at designing and influencing conditions. Taylor separated the roles of workers from managers. I saw a separation between designer and participant. As I reflect on my behavior during the events I have written about I vividly see this separation: circulating “outside the conversations” and periodically checking into the conversations to see how things were going; watching for patterns; and adjusting the design where I thought appropriate. I also began to understand as I wrote the point Stacey makes how natural scientists and most organizational theorists who developed complexity informed approaches to management accept the notion of the objective observer who is not part of and stands outside the boundary of the system under consideration (Stacey, 2003a).

*Moving Towards Participation*

Despite my emphasis on creating conditions, I had a very powerful experience as a participant in one of the learning sessions I organized. It led me to see the distinction between participant and facilitator/designer was not as clear as I had thought. Design is a form of participation, and not fully engaging in the working conversations of the events I organized was also a form of participation. Here is what I wrote in my journal.

In June 1998 I had gathered some thirty prominent hospitals CEOs, doctors and nursing leaders from CHA organizations...It was my first chance outside New Jersey to share with folks what I had been learning about complexity and how it could lead to healthier organizations.

I was a bit, no more than a bit anxious. To make sure things went well I brought in the big guns – Ralph Stacey and Patricia Shaw came all the way from England, and Stuart Kauffman, one of the founders of complexity science, agreed to spend a whole day with us. Fool proof I thought. In planning the session Ralph asked if he could show a movie called *Oleana* to start things off. A powerful example of a complex, unpredictable system he said. Also, he warned me, it was a bit troubling.

A bit troubling...Two hours later, after watching a relationship between a male British professor and a young female student careen out of control, become physically and emotionally abusive, I was a wreck. Looking around the room at the Santa Fe Institute at CEOs who sat stunned and shocked, I imagined they were angry with me, pissed off. What in the world could this film have to do with better ways of leading...? My chance to engage these influential people had been taken from me.

Thankfully, *Oleana* came to an end and it was time for lunch. I went right over to Ralph and told him we had to talk privately. I said something like, “We have to do something different, they’re upset, we’re losing them. Why don’t you give one of your lectures about complexity and organizations?” Ralph said OK, a bit reluctantly I think. The afternoon session seemed to go fine. Folks were interested in his remarks and the agreement and certainty matrix he drew on the overhead (Stacey, 1996).

It was a long night. I hardly slept at all...I was not comfortable with my assertion of control. I was worried about what participants thought of me and my work. Would anyone show up the next morning, I wondered.

Well, everyone did show up. We started as planned, sitting in a circle, asking people to share reflections on the previous day. Usually I just listened during such sessions, thinking about what the shared reflections suggested about how we should use the remaining time together. But for some reason I started, went first. With a lump in my throat...I told everyone what I had done the day before and why. Out of my anxiety driven by a concern about what they were thinking about me, I unilaterally changed the meeting plan and got Ralph to do something I thought they would find acceptable.

I had no idea what was going to happen next. There was total silence for what seemed like an eternity. Then a *cascade* of frank comments flowed. My soon to be boss at CHA, Curt Daly, was first to speak. "I was really angry," he said. "You obviously showed *Oleana* for a reason. It got me real upset and we never got a chance to make sense of what we saw. I felt jarred when Ralph got up and lectured after lunch. But you know, I never said anything about this, I just let it go." Someone else said, "Well, we got a bunch of folks together over lunch to talk about the film and we did make some sense of it. The emotional power of *Oleana* knocked us off balance and drove us to figure out what it was telling us. So having Ralph follow with a talk about complexity and organizations was good, fit well for us."

Well....this insightful conversation and set of reflections just kept going. It was alive, healthy, an example of a free-flowing human complex system in motion, one I will never forget. It made complexity science more human and personal to me. We saw and witnessed emergence, how a small change in practice can shift the whole nature of a conversation, and how conversational patterns can shift unpredictably.

In addition to causing me to question the distinction I had held so firmly between designer and participant, efforts now to make new sense of this experience help me understand this distinction is based upon a systems view of organizations and the related spatial, insider-outsider metaphor. Simultaneously, I began to grant some privilege to a process orientation in organizations and started connecting with the writings of G. H. Mead and Norbert Elias.

I now see the showing of *Oleana* as a gesture Ralph made to the group, a gesture made as a result of an invitation to participate in the work of this group. The gesture of *Oleana* in turn led to many responses, including my action as the “outside” manager to assert control. This gesture caused other responses, some within the group and some within me, which together led to the unplanned Saturday morning conversation. I picture this experience in more process terms and begin to disengage with the insider (participant) – outsider (designing manager) distinction of systems thinking and gain a partial glimpse into Mead’s insights about the gesture-response process. “The response of one organism to the gesture of another in any given social act is the meaning of that gesture, and also is in a sense responsible for the...coming into being...of new content...” (Mead, 1934, p. 78). Such a process orientation is also sympathetic with the proposal put forward by Elias that “concepts such as “individual” and “society” do not relate to two objects separately but to different yet inseparable aspects of the same human beings...” (Elias, 2000, p. 455). Yet, as the story unfolds, we will see that systems thinking was still entrenched in my mind.

Two years later and with neither warning nor explanation, Curt Daly fired my small staff and me from CHA. This took place several weeks before a national CHA meeting in Chicago on complexity and healthcare I had organized. Since quite a number of the complexity scientists and healthcare managers who had been involved in the CHA complexity initiatives were in attendance, we used the opportunity to talk about what happened. During this evening session many expressed anger towards CHA senior executives. After this venting the conversation turned to how we could move forward.

Brenda Zimmerman articulated a view held by others in the room. “Curt, before you decide what to do next, you should take some time and reflect on what you really want to do next and not feel any obligation to help us stay together. However, if you want to

continue the work we've started, we'd be thrilled and will all pitch in to make it happen." It took me about a week to reach a strongly felt conclusion. There was *nothing* I would rather do than continue working with this extraordinary group of people. A week later, I got a call from Bob Graber, the president of the international division of Merck. Bob, who had participated in one CHA complexity workshop, told me that he had heard what happened and wanted me to know he was thinking about what to do in his retirement. One idea of most interest to him, he explained, was the creation of an institute devoted to "happy" organizations.

Feeling this support, I spent a year of volunteer time incorporating a new non-profit organization, forming a board of trustees, securing contributions, and obtaining necessary government approvals. In December 2000 Plek Institute was officially created. Bob was elected chair of the board of trustees. Many who attended the final CHA complexity gathering gave money, joined as members, or became trustees. I was selected president. We adopted the following statement as the purpose of the Institute – to foster the health of individuals, families, organizations, and our natural environment by helping people use concepts emerging from the new science of complexity.

### *A Family Experience*

In the next year I had another experience with the facilitator-participant distinction, though I did not hold this distinction in mind at the time because it involved a different type of organization, my family. And simply because this story took place in my family, there was less of an option to stand outside it and serve as the process designer.

Toward the end of his life my father suffered from prostate cancer and Parkinson's disease. In 2001 when his oncologist told us his PSA, a test that measures the extent of prostate cancer, was over 5,000, it became clear my dad would not live much longer. After hearing this news I became *depressed*. I loved my father and did not know how to help him live his last days well.

After stewing about this it struck me that perhaps what I was learning about complex systems could help in some way. And perhaps my brother Bob, an internal medicine physician who was learning about complexity too, and I could work as partners. Bob and

I began to explore what could be done to help make our Dad's last days the best they could be. Bob's medical experience and our knowledge of complex system behavior told us that the course of our father's death was not knowable. In a journal article I wrote:

Complexity science teaches us it is not possible to predict the future with any certainty and, therefore, not wise to cast your lot with detailed plans. A more realistic alternative is to concentrate on the present, to make sense of what is going on to guide what to do next. We also learned that making the "best" sense of a situation is a social process, enhanced by different perspectives and a rich flow of information.

(Lindberg, 2005, p. 151)

With this understanding in mind along with insights from our study of complexity science, my brother and I came up with several principles to guide our efforts:

- honor the guidance Dad and Mom had given us;
- be present – to help and see what's going on;
- stay in touch, share lots of information with the whole family;
- embrace the wisdom, diverse skills and insights in the family;
- take small steps, see how they work and make needed adjustments; and
- provide whatever stability and certainty we could.

These principles represented a coming to terms with "not knowing" and a process way forward, a process informed by an appreciation of several complexity-based approaches I had previously come to understand. They were also informed by the writings of Stacey and colleagues on complex responsive processes which called for attention to everyday interactions and conversations (Stacey, 2001; Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2000). These principles manifested themselves in numerous ways. Every Sunday evening the whole family would join in a conference call to talk about what was going on and deal with any pressing matters. One of Dad's children would be with him every day and, towards the end, all night too. An email with pertinent observations would be circulated to the family each day by the "on duty" family member.



Lots of issues were handled thoughtfully: when to obtain a hospital bed; fine tuning his pain medication regime; initiation of hospice care and how to help everyone come to terms with this decision; filling in for a family member who needed relief from the stress; finding a diet Dad liked (licorice, ice cream and frozen grapes anyone?). I called these and the many other decisions and actions taken by members of the family lots of little miracles. Together, they led to a beautiful death, which Dad described in a note he scrawled two weeks before he passed away.

Don't feel too badly when I leave you. The joys that I have seen of our offspring, all happy, responsible people, devoted to each other and me. You can not have known how glad that makes me feel.

In 1999 I got old and realized my own mortality. My enormous weight loss could not be reversed. It pains me to even write your names. Curt and Claire; Bill and Judy; Bob and Pam; Nancy and Tim; Tom and Sue; Kristen and Colin; Sarah and Laura; Kate and Emily; Megan and Kelly; Nicole and Karl; Anita and Joan.

I am leaving under the circumstances everyone wishes for – a dignified passing, secure in the knowledge that our friends have told us we have the finest family they have ever known.

Mother taken care of,  
 Children around me,  
 Any pain will be handled,  
 At home in my bed,  
 78 years of happiness and 54 years of devotion from the girl who I fell in love with at first sight, my Lois.

(Lindberg, 2005, p. 152)

This entire episode was the most moving and meaningful experience of my life. It “*told*” me in a profound way how significant a “complexity way” of thinking and acting could be. When people ask me about the practical value of complexity-based practices and insights, I tell them this story.

### *One-eyed Reality*

As I redrafted this paper I began to wonder what my understanding this experience did *not* tell me. This observation came to me after a faculty supervisor suggested I reexamine my stories and ask why they seem so complete, so clean. Where is the confusion, the questions, she asked? Reflecting on this question in light of the reading and conversations in the DMan program brought to mind the forgotten message of a favorite book, signaled in its title, *Images of Organization* (Morgan, 1986). I saw that whether it is in the story about my father's last months of life, my role as coordinator of planning at Elizabeth General, or my work introducing complexity science concepts, I adopted a single image about how organizations work best and leaders *should* behave. I sensed this orientation was grounded on a deep-seated, and until now, unconscious, view that there was a single reality. Advances in organizational theory are understood as closer approximations of this reality. Such an orientation probably stems from the natural sciences and has been called "Cartesian anxiety". Over the years it led me to drop conventional models of management and unquestioningly embrace, at least for a while, new models.

My "one-eyed" seeing brought into focus my role as designer of events and experiences and blinded me to other ways of understanding what was happening, the social nature of reality, and to other ways of being involved. As I looked again at the preceding story about my family it struck me there was no mention about the nature and patterns of conversation I had with my brothers and sisters. Gareth Morgan's insight, "Organizations are many things at once" (Morgan, 1986, p. 339), had gone unheeded. Gergen's warning confronted me.

Whenever we hold firm to a particular account of the real, we seal ourselves off from other possibilities. In this sense, what is most obvious to us – most compelling at any given time – is also most delimiting.

(Gergen, 1999, pp. 222-223)

Such observations drove home to me how daunting was the process of unseating the natural science and systems ways of thinking and behaving that had become such an integral part of my identity. Such reflections led to a thirst for insight into how I typically

engaged in everyday conversation and to an interest in actions I could take to participate more creatively in human interactions and grow beyond my penchant for designing and facilitating. How to examine my own behavior in groups and in individual conversations became a question of importance to me. My curiosity was heightened further during an experience at a workshop sponsored by Plek Institute and by reflections on the large group conversations at the first residential session of the new doctorate in management (DMan) class in October, 2004.

Here is the story from the workshop entitled “Learning with Ralph Stacey: On Thinking and Learning About Complex Responsive Processes.” With workshop presentations and conversations highlighting the central role of interactions and diversity in the process of change and innovation, Ralph Stacey and others delved into what it meant to embody and live these concepts in everyday organizational interactions. John Bobbin, in a panel exchange, noted how difficult it was to augment our typical inward, self-focused orientation in conversations to one that also sought to understand and attend closely to interactions as they occurred. Fortunately, later in the panel discussion we experienced a powerful example of this point.

In a discussion about how meaning emerges between people in conversation, Bob Graber interjected and began listing answers to questions raised by conference participants in the preceding session. Undoubtedly, Bob did this out of respect for those who had posed the questions and to provide some helpful answers informed by his experience. In the midst of his stream of answers, John Taylor, a recent DMan graduate, gently put his hand on Bob’s shoulder and offered a reflection. “I am wondering if the questions were an invitation to a conversation, and if this is what is happening here?” The essence of his comment was that Bob’s behavior in providing answers was out of tune with the preceding discussion which emphasized the creation of meaning through conversation and difference. Bob did not seem to be inviting interaction by simply giving answers. Yet following John’s question, Bob, with a twinkle in his eyes, threw up his hands and said, “I get it John, thanks.”

On the surface and after a few other comments by participants, this ended the interaction. The next morning, however, the matter was picked up again when Bob asked for a little time to share reflections that struck him during the night. After pointing out a few

insights he had written on a flip chart, he invited other observations. Among the points I remember were: how the touch on the shoulder indicated the friendly intent of John's intervention; the fact that Bob and John knew each other quite well might have made John's intervention possible; some viewed John's observation as an unnecessary intrusion and needlessly harsh; how others shared but did not voice John's point; and probably most importantly, how everyone shaped the experience whether or not they voiced something publicly.

How meaningful this shared experience was for me became clearer after the conference in the car ride home with Bob and Michelle Hutchison, a Plek co-worker. It was dark, there was lots of traffic and I was concentrating on driving. I was also feeling quite good about the two just completed conferences. They seemed quite successful and several participants voiced their compliments to me on the value of the conferences and, more generally, of Plek. I was tired and in the mood for some quiet time. An hour or so into the ride Bob began sharing thoughts on what should have been done differently at the conferences. He also questioned in an extended manner the wisdom of my decision to offer a free book to participants as a gesture of thanks for their active engagement in the deliberations. Something free he said, diminished its value, was in essence a bribe, a tease. He concluded by saying it was like a drug dealer offering a free sample of drugs in the hope of hooking a new buyer.

Running through my head was a silent conversation. I can see the validity of some of your suggestions Bob. You are not being very balanced in your observations for there was much that worked well during the events. Can't you view the book offer as an act of generosity to the learners, and readers in Plek? My feeling of elation and accomplishment began to recede, replaced by a sense of inadequacy. Finally after Bob added one more comment about the book give-away, I raised my hand and said, "Uncle!" This had the intended impact of ending the conversation, and acknowledging his point. My point was, I surrender, let's move onto something else. Bob and Michelle responded to my cry of uncle with little chuckles and did not invite an elaboration on my surrender, and no one offered any reflection of the interaction which had just occurred.

My behavior, and in some ways the behavior of all three of us, essentially foreclosed the opportunity to learn from the exchange, at least at that moment. To explore differences,

to look outside one's self and examine interaction in light of the conference experience, to...

However, I kept thinking about the conjunction of three experiences: the conceptual explorations of complex responsive processes undertaken during the workshop; the memorable interchange between Bob and John; and the personal exchanges Bob, Michelle and I had driving home. The experience brought back memories from my youth, of how as a family we never talked about disturbing events and how we dealt with them. It made me wonder how this history was affecting me. My reading of complexity and experience with others, most notably nursing leaders and my wife, have helped me appreciate the value of explored differences to create new understandings and ways forward, of the role of anxiety in the process of change, and of the benefits and risks of voicing feelings and thoughts more freely.

Understanding some of the key concepts of complex responsive process theory, especially power differentials, helped me to examine my relationship with Bob. Bob chairs the Board of Trustees of Plek, has provided substantial donations to the Institute, had a stellar career at Merck, and is *very* smart. I view him as an essential and powerful figure in Plek, which at times causes me to be deferential. Sometimes, I found myself in a pattern of interaction with him that went, in a simplified version, like this. Bob would make a suggestion. I would respond, "What a good idea."

This string of experiences and reflections caused me to modify my thinking about a possible focus for my work in the DMan program, away from organization-wide issues to a more personal examination of my own beliefs and behavior in relating to others and a focus on the difficulties of letting go of the systems view of organizations.

### *Moving On...*

I came to suspect that my concentration in Plek on designing – creating conditions, establishing new connections and relationships with complexity scholars and organizational practitioners – was leaving important work under-attended. On my mind were desires to be more present and active in discussions, to rise "outside" conversations to make sense of the patterns of interacting, to examine what I could do to contribute to

more creative conversations possible, to work with paradox and difference, and to develop a better sense for what to pay attention to in conversations.

The experience at the recent workshop and in interactions with students and faculty in the initial meetings of the DMan program, considered in light of lessons learned in developing Plek, helped me appreciate the power of learning from concepts, shared experiences, and individual and collective reflection. It is as if concept, experience and reflection had its own voice and added diversity to the overall learning “conversation”.

I started to sense the beginning of this conversation in the first residential session of the DMan program and the first gathering of our learning set, a subgroup of four students and one faculty member. The large group residential sessions, due to their size, encouraged one to listen and notice what was happening. I witnessed many different styles of participation, including my own. My typical approach was to make a point, a declarative statement, which I now see as befitting my one-eyed view of reality. I also noticed this usually elicited minimal or no response. Gergen observed that such strategies “close off options for dialogue” (Gergen, 1999, p. 223). I noticed that others who spoke more in stories or metaphors or who sought insight about a particular moment in a story triggered more conversation, movement and exploration. I noticed how Eliat Aram, a faculty member, asked one of my student colleagues to tell us why he sent a second email to Ralph Stacey pressing for admittance to the DMan program after being told the class was filled. It led to an illuminating and moving statement about what was important to him in his work. I noticed how another classmate quietly said something like, “I can’t believe that in this conversation about human behavior the word gene has not been mentioned once.” This expression of difference really livened up the large group conversation. I came to appreciate more fully how Bob Graber opens up and extends conversations. With uncertainty in mind, he’ll say something like, “I’m not sure what I think about this, but just consider whether \_\_\_\_\_ (the opposite of a position being advocated) could hold some merit too.”

I am seeking an extended “conversation” of this nature: a deep, lived and reflective experience with others who share a desire to examine their behavior and better understand the dynamics of human interactions. I am seeking the help of my DMan classmates, the faculty, and the literature of complexity science, sociology, physiology,

psychology, and communications theory to help me more fully understand my behavior in conversations, its impact, and to explore and practice other ways of participating. I believe such an endeavor will be intrinsically valuable and help me become a more effective leader in Plek Institute.

It is my intent to use this developmental experience to make a contribution to management theory and practice in one or more ways. Should I be successful in *moving* from a perspective of leader as primarily a designer (and a believer in one Cartesian reality, in systems thinking) to a more nuanced perspective able to draw out and engage multiple diverse perspectives and paradox in others and myself, I will seek to uncover and share insights into this *process of movement* in thought and practice. Additionally, I will strive to use the results of this movement to advance understanding of the role of the leader and contribute fresh thinking to what Gareth Morgan identified as a fundamental challenge of management in this age, namely that “the complexity and sophistication of our thinking do not match the complexity and sophistication of the realities with which we have to deal” (Morgan, 1986, p. 339).

To successfully traverse the depth, difficulty and distance in Morgan’s challenge, Stacey suggests, from a psychological perspective, the need for a “good enough holding” or its complexity science counterpart, an edge of chaos, condition (Stacey, 2003a, p. 379). It is my belief this viewpoint is too narrow and should be enlarged to encompass related physiologic dynamics. Recent research in complexity science in medicine suggests that health is a dynamical state characterized by a high degree of complexity and fractal-like variability. A diminution in this complexity, or what Ary Goldberger calls “complexity loss”, is associated with many chronic diseases and physiologic systems which are less adaptable (Goldberger, 1997, p. 546). Other scholars explore this finding and extend it into the psychological domain.

Efficient functioning is seen as a multiply determined and multidirectional process that is manifested in high levels of variability. Thus, healthy systems are generally *more* labile and maintain “far-from-equilibrium” dynamics, whereas rigid regularity and low temporal complexity characterize disease states. In the realm of cardiovascular and psychopathology, decreased HPV (heart period variability) has

been associated with hypertension,...aging as well as panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder and depression.

(Thayer & Friedman, 1997, p. 40)

Different scholars report that diminished heart rate variability is related to anxiety disorders (Berntson, Cacioppo, & J., 2004). Correspondingly, there is evidence that increased heart period variability, a marker of physiologic complexity, is associated with “increased attentional, affective, and behavioral flexibility” (Thayer & Friedman, 1997, p. 41) and that heart rate variability measures may increase following psychotherapy (Thayer & Friedman, 1997).

This line of inquiry and research – which suggests that physiologic dynamics affect psychological processes such as anxiety, that physiologic dynamics are in turn influenced by social interactions, and that “holding anxiety” is a necessary condition for learning – will be explored to generate possible new approaches for enabling significant movement in an individual’s organizational understanding and behavior.

My sense is that many in senior management share my “designer style”, seeing it as their job to attend to the whole organization, to stand outside to understand and shape it. They, like me, could stand some *movement* and more understanding of how to *move*.

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## PROJECT TWO

### **Shifting Power: Crafting Performance Evaluation Processes in a Small Educational Institute**

Submitted September 2005

I will describe and reflect on my experience in creating a new performance evaluation process, drawing on concepts from complexity science and complex responsive processes theory and the literature on performance management, leadership, power, conflict, and anxiety.

#### *Two Worlds*

- “Curt is an outstanding leader.....He has terrific ideas, creates opportunities and alliances for those (and other) ideas to coalesce and simmer, and then finds ways to give them voice.....He lives complexity principles and is totally committed to helping others learn and practice a new way of making sense of their organizational and personal lives – he is the model for networking – his sense of inclusiveness serves us well – he has brought a diverse membership together, largely by his willingness to explore possibilities that most of us would miss.”
- “Tune into staff skill sets, value them and mentor opportunities for growth and development. Send consistent messages in actions and words. The view from the inside and the view from the outside seem to be two different things.”

I am currently in the midst of creating an approach to employee performance evaluations for the young educational organization I lead. No organized process for such assessments is in place. The need for this became apparent when I received the above feedback in my performance evaluation. While receiving a very high overall appraisal, the feedback I received from trustees was full of contrast. I was rated very highly in my support for members served by the Institute, in providing opportunities for learning, and in my ability to interact productively with complexity scientists. Yet the staff and those familiar with the internal operations of the organization saw me differently. They rated me lower in

areas such as engagement in internal operations, provision of feedback, and attention to routine management practices.

To begin my official performance evaluation session the three trustees who coordinated the process requested that I start by reflecting on my performance, utilizing as a guide the questionnaire used to gather feedback from others. After speaking briefly about my strengths at connecting people and ideas and sensing trends in the fields of organizational theory and management, I devoted more time to my perceived weaknesses and the need to improve in a number of areas. I spoke about engaging people when there was conflict or poor performance involved, reflecting on the dynamics of conversations in which I was involved, and exploring different options for my participation.

John, one of the trustees, asked me about my comment on my skills in connecting people and ideas and my curiosity for new ideas (which he said he saw in me too) and asked a question. “If this is your orientation, why don’t you pay sufficient attention to these areas in the office, and how do you see yourself in this capacity?” This led me to observe how different the internal and external perceptions of me were and ask why this is so. As I made this remark, an idea struck me. Why not begin to see the Institute staff world as a special place to explore the concepts promoted by the Institute? It could become a “close to home” learning opportunity. Such a shift would require that I do away with the *distinction in my thinking and behavior between Institute staff and Institute members.*

Bob, who chairs the board, noted that the inside-outside issue basically required that I act differently inside the organization and that these actions were within my abilities. He said “there is nothing that’s less important” (referring to outside and inside distinction). Carol, the third trustee, spoke of “turning the magic of Plek inward”. In this emerging picture it was clear that I viewed those outside the staff organization as more important in establishing the young Institute.

Looking back on this whole experience made me realize my management behavior was consistent with traditional management thinking which places the leader as objective and detached from the organization and in the role of designer and controller. This view stems from systems thinking and the concepts of the objective observer and organizations as systems. Such a perspective places the onus for significant change in the hands of leaders – individuals who stand above the organization and assume primary responsibility for

selecting and assessing performance of staff, improving processes, setting direction, and shaping culture (Stacey, 2003b). It affords little attention to how leaders engage in routine everyday organizational activities like participating in regular staff meetings, budget planning, and employee performance evaluations and, concomitantly, how their everyday behaviors affect the organization and how they as leaders are affected.

I had just had a very different experience from this conventional management approach in my evaluation with Carol, John, and Bob. Here were three trustees responding with genuine interest and seriousness to my request for an assessment of how I was doing as president of Plek. The process did not feel like a one-way evaluation by objective observers, but rather a conversation devoted to making sense of the operations of Plek, with particular attention to my behavior. This sense was made together and informed by input from a diverse array of Plek players which, along with personal observations, John, Bob, Carrol, and I drew upon.

The conversation lasted about three hours. I left feeling drained from participating so intensely on such a personal topic, buoyed with new insights into my behavior and ways of thinking, and overwhelmed. How could I ever make all the called for changes? I also left feeling profoundly touched by the interest displayed by the three trustees and with a growing awareness that here were colleagues I could call upon for ongoing help.

This approach seemed in line with the work of Stacey and colleagues in the Complexity and Management Center at the University of Hertfordshire. They challenge the conventional view of organizations as systems and leaders as dispassionate, external operators in their theory of complex responsive processes (Stacey, 2001; Stacey, 2003b; Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2000). This theory accords a special place to everyday, commonplace interactions and conversations.

One of my initial reactions to this string of realizations was to share the findings of my evaluation at a regular meeting of the Institute staff. As I gave everyone a written copy of the evaluation, I thanked them for their honest assessment and asked for their ongoing help in my improvement efforts, noting that this could not be a solitary effort. I acknowledged how difficult it must have been for them to convey critical comments about me to the trustees. Such disclosure – about feelings, relationships, and personal

difficulties – was not typical of our staff meetings. We almost always dealt with “work” issues. As this part of our meeting wound to a close, Rebecca said she appreciated what I had shared and noted that it must have been difficult to do. She was right. To further the “engagement of Curt” in internal operations, I decided to create, with the staff, a process for assessing all Institute staff, focusing on staff issues and connecting better with employees.

### *A Humiliating Experience*

During the latter part of the meeting, I asked for volunteers to work with me in creating a pilot evaluation process. The request was met with silence, at least for a while. Then Claire said, with considerable feeling, “Why would *anyone* want to subject themselves to what was a humiliating experience?” This unexpected outburst left me embarrassed and stunned. No words of reply came to mind. After all, it was a colleague and I who had conducted what was a traditional performance evaluation of Claire. Unthinkingly, I sought some space and time to consider what happened and to think about how and whether to respond. So, without any objection, I brought the meeting to an end with a request: to think about what we had discussed. As I reflected on this experience, I realized I should have lengthened my request to include what had not been discussed – the nature of Claire's experience and why the evaluation had been so humiliating and why we did not talk about this.

While not understanding in the moment what had happened, I had a barely conscious awareness that something important had transpired. Claire's participation in the staff meeting, like mine in the opening of the session, was different. Some risks were taken.

Later that day, Claire walked quietly over to my desk and asked why I thought evaluations were even necessary. After all, her work was not that important, it only involved writing and clerical duties. I responded by saying that everyone played a significant role and had opportunities to grow, to improve. Such an exchange, a question followed by a brief answer, was a common pattern in our interactions.

Apparently, Claire's evaluation experience was typical. A review of the management literature found widespread dissatisfaction among employees, managers and those

responsible for designing performance appraisal systems (Bernardin et al., 1998; Buzzotta, 1998; Cardy, 1998; Jackman, 2003; Kindall, 1963; Levinson, 1970; Levinson, 1976; McGregor, 1972). This view was captured by Zemke. “Performance appraisals. Nobody likes them, everybody does them, and few are confident in the results” (Zemke, 1991, p.134).

### *A Step through Conflict, an Opening?*

Monday of the next week Claire walked over and said she would volunteer to go first, to participate in the pilot. She noted that she had worked at the Institute longer than others, so this was only fair. I sensed she was stepping forward with some reluctance and trepidation. I thanked her for volunteering and acknowledged that this must have been a difficult decision in light of the poor experience she had last time.

We continued chatting and an idea emerged. I stated I would like to craft a process *with her*, with a goal of creating something that was *truly meaningful for her*. In making this offer, several questions were running through my mind. How can I reduce the perceived power differential between us? By giving her a genuine voice in designing the process, can I telegraph the message that I value her opinion and her role? Could this collaborative experience lead to a better working relationship between us? The sociologist Norbert Elias pointed out that a reduction in power differentials allows for outcomes that are unexpected and not under the control of either party in a relationship.

...to the extent that the inequality in the strengths of the two players diminishes, there will result from the interweaving of moves of two individual people a game process *which neither of them has planned.*”

(Elias, 1970, p. 82)

Claire’s strong statement during the staff meeting represented a new opening and what Elias would see as a real shift in power. Elias understands power as a function of relationships characterized by interdependence and as a feature which is dynamic (Elias, 1970). “Power is not an amulet possessed by one person and not by another; it is a structural characteristic of human relationships – of *all* human relationships” (Elias, 1998, p. 116). Stacey sees such shifts in power and changes in patterns in a relationship as the

basis for change and points to the critical role played by diversity in emergence of novelty (Stacey, 2003a).

Going beyond the basis for change and achieving change also seem to require that a shift in power or a novel, different action be noticed and responded to by the participating parties. Perhaps Claire and I were beginning to experiment with more attention and responsiveness to shifts in power and disruption. She responded to a request from trustees for feedback on my performance. I responded by sharing the results of my evaluation. She responded with a statement concerning her feelings about her first evaluation and then volunteered to work with me to create a new process. Suchman sees the link between diversity, such as power shifts, *and* responsiveness as essential for building new ways of working together (Suchman, 2006).

### *Going Back In Time*

Before continuing the story about the evaluation process, I would like to go back and explore the nature of the working relationship Claire and I had developed. Claire was hired as an administrative assistant at a point in her career when she reentered the workforce after raising several children. Her previous work experience was as a journalist and newspaper editor. Over time, her role within the Institute changed to involve considerable writing, her forte and something she enjoyed. She became increasingly interested in complexity science, the focus of much of the Institute's work.

We had a business-like relationship. Most of our interactions were of a brief nature and dealt with Institute projects. In our conversations, Claire was quite deferential. "You know what's best" was a common statement. She frequently sought authorization for her actions – to send a draft story to someone she interviewed, or to make a posting to our listserv, for example. I directed my attention in our interactions to her work, providing some feedback on assigned tasks, asking her to take on new projects, and encouraging her to make more decisions. Little thought or conversation was directed at our patterns of interactions or how we worked together.

Claire had a very challenging family situation, involving a seriously handicapped son. His care required much of Claire, whether it was attending to his needs or fighting

bureaucracies to provide the services to which he was entitled. Her perseverance and her willingness to take on government organizations showed real inner strength. These demands left little time for Claire to attend to her own needs, to take good care of herself. Her health suffered as a consequence. Aware of her circumstances, I tended to tread carefully, avoiding potentially upsetting discussions on work performance issues.

Claire, I believe respected me for founding the Institute, for the energy devoted to its development, for my knowledge of complexity science and management, and for the relationships I had developed with leading scientists. Because of this, the nature of our relationship, and our respective official positions in the organizations, she probably experienced a great difference in power between her and me.

This, I imagine, was felt during the performance evaluation Claire characterized as humiliating. Michelle, the office manager at the time of the evaluation, and I had followed a conventional script. We examined the needs of the Institute, compared notes on how we felt Claire was performing in her role, identified areas needing improvement (which dealt mostly with accuracy of data input and proper use of office systems) and expected improvements in problem areas, considered how to best convey our findings, and then shared our assessment in a three-way meeting.

### *What the Literature Suggests*

One can readily recognize this approach in the broad consensus evident in the management literature on the basic purposes and characteristics of effective evaluations. Telling subordinates how they are doing and how they can improve, and then motivating them to improve performance are commonly cited objectives of performance evaluation (also called performance management and performance appraisal) systems (Bacal, 2004; Bruns, 1992; Bruns & McKinnon, 2005; Grote, 1996; Levinson, 1976; McGregor, 1972; Mohrman, Resnick-West, & Lawler, 1989; Soltani & et al, 2002; Zemke, 1991). Such steps are taken for the purposes of advancing and controlling individual and organizational performance, as well as justifying salary changes, promotions, and transfers (Bruns & McKinnon, 2005; Ghorpade, Chen, & Caggiano, 1995; Grote, 1996; Kindall, 1963; Mohrman, Resnick-West, & Lawler, 1989; Zemke, 1991).

Effective evaluations are generally envisioned as consisting of several basic steps: establishing employee objectives based on organizational plans; gathering and documenting information on performance with respect to these objectives; communicating in a face-to-face meeting between a manager and employee the findings on performance; identifying performance problems and what to do about them; and planning follow-up (Bacal, 2004; Gilliland & Langdon, 1998; Grote, 1996; Mohrman, Resnick-West, & Lawler, 1989).

Much of the management literature on performance evaluations accepts the viability of this basic model and assumes that problems encountered are due to the manner in which the process was applied. This can be appreciated by examining a sample of recommended refinements to performance evaluation systems.

- Involvement of employees in the design of the system (Ghorpade, Chen, & Caggiano, 1995).
- Recognition of the impact of organizational systems on individual performance (Soltani & et al, 2002).
- Training for those conducting evaluations (Zemke, 1991).
- Heightened responsibility for employees in establishing performance targets and assessing their performance (Kindall, 1963; McGregor, 1972).
- Gathering information on performance from a variety of sources. (Bernardin, Hagan, Kane, & Villanova, 1998; Carlson, 1998; Levinson, 1970; Soltani & et al, 2002).
- Helping employees seek feedback (Jackman, 2003).

Griffin, a colleague of Stacey, would view the basic mode of performance evaluation, as well as the approach taken to Claire's evaluation, as an example of systemic self-organization. Here, the cause of change in the system (the employee, the organization) is the autonomous external observer (the manager, the evaluator), who also serves as a participant in the system. The system is seen as changing in line with the purposes and intentions "put into the system" by the external observer (Griffin, 2002, p. 14). Upon reflection, I saw that I tended to approach and think about Claire from Griffin's systemic self-organization perspective. I viewed her as a system, a person who could benefit from some directed improvement, some applied external guidance. I had not previously



examined the role I played or how our interactions yielded the patterns of behavior we experienced.

Assumptions underlying performance evaluation systems are not widely identified in the management literature and, hence, questions about the basic approach to appraisals are rarely encountered. One can gain a sense for these assumptions by considering the meanings of the terms employee performance appraisal, employee performance evaluation, and employee performance management. Listen for what these terms have come to mean from the basic assumptions I identified in a review of the literature on performance evaluation systems.

- Leaders can foresee the employee behaviors and skills critical to the success of organizations and identify opportunities for employee performance improvement. Leaders are the primary engines of change and are not themselves affected by the evaluation.
- The behavior of individuals is essentially an independent activity and can, with effort, be isolated and objectively understood by managers.
- Organizational performance is heavily dependent on the behavior of individuals.
- If feedback on performance and guidance on the means to improve unsatisfactory performance are provided, desired changes in individual performance will result. Behavior change can be reliably managed and is primarily a solitary endeavor. The evaluating manager provides feedback and guidance and the employee determines how to achieve the prescribed change.
- Meaningful and lasting improvements in employee behavior will follow from what in many circumstances is a single annual, planned evaluation session.
- A uniform and orderly process is appropriate for all employees.

### *More Steps*

When Claire and I sat down to begin exploring what kind of process we wanted to design, I showed her the questionnaire the board had used with me and suggested we identify some questions that would yield meaningful feedback. She surprised me by pulling out research she had done online and told me of conversations she had had with others in the office about their experiences with evaluations. This triggered a discussion about

approaching our evaluation project by seeking input from a variety of sources and people. I told her about some of the books I was reading in my doctoral program and how they were shaping my thinking. I spoke about some of the concepts from *The Emergence of Leadership: Linking self-organization and ethics* and noted that I had ordered her a copy (Griffin, 2002). She mentioned a process used by one of the members of the Institute to help people remain in relationships as they worked through differences. She asked what ideas I had from complexity science that could inform the process, so we talked about the value of diversity and processes that encouraged interaction. All of a sudden she said, “You know, what I would really value is a critical assessment of my writing.” I then observed that several people who served on the board of the Institute were internationally renowned journalists and I was quite sure they would be willing to help out. As we concluded this portion of the conversation Claire said, “I would *really* welcome their thoughts on my writing.”

This moment felt like a turning point, a surprising development in our conversation that held the potential for a significant shift in our endeavor, from a process tolerated from a sense of duty to one of genuine engagement. Complexity scientists might view this interaction as an example of nonlinear behavior, where a seemingly small change, called a bifurcation or fluctuation, triggers something larger, a move to a new dynamic.

...in such a state [unstable] certain fluctuations, instead of regressing, may be amplified and invade the entire system, compelling it to evolve toward a new regime that may be qualitatively different from the stationary states...

(Prigogine & Stengers, 1984, p. 140)

Stacey explored this point in human organizations and argued that small changes are the seeds for potential transformation (Stacey, 2003a).

From this point our conversation became more animated, full of possibilities, and *much less* guarded and tentative. There was lightness and laughter. I was delighted with the thoughtful initiative Claire had displayed in her preparations. She exhibited a willingness to enroll in the “construction” project. There was energy, engagement, and spontaneity in our conversation. I lost myself in the flow of our deliberations. We even spoke about writing an article together for the Institute's newsletter on the evaluation process we

created. I told her how her honest participation in my evaluation played into this process. We explored how our patterns of behavior were jointly constructed and how an evaluation process that simply focused on an individual and not on relationships and patterns of interaction would be nearsighted. Our meeting ended with an agreement that Claire would prepare for our next meeting a list of suggested questions for inclusion in the evaluation survey.

As we conversed some thoughts ran through my mind.

- Perhaps by speaking openly about my evaluation and my interest in learning from the process, and in demonstrating a genuine interest in shaping a process with her, Claire would experience less of a power difference between us. Until this time I had not truly understood the significance of power differentials in shaping interactions. I had viewed myself as open and not overly directive or authoritarian. My role in subtly creating power differences had not been apparent to me.
- By talking about how most everything we do is social, the role our histories and previous interactions played in shaping our working relationship would become more apparent. Such a view would call into question the typical approach taken in many standard performance evaluations: one person judging another.
- The point Griffin makes about our tendency to blame the system and not acknowledge the role we all play in what goes on (Griffin, 2002). This whole experience helped me see what a powerful role Claire was playing. I was hoping she was coming to appreciate her influence.

Two days later at one of our daily informal staff meetings, I asked Claire if she wanted to share an update on our discussions. She willingly offered highlights of our explorations and the modifications we made to the approach used by the board with me. I mentioned as an example the questions we had developed on her writing and how this idea emerged from our interaction. Claire then said with a laugh, “Guess I should not have mentioned the writing” and went on to describe how much she looked forward to critiques from writers she admired. This triggered a thought which I then shared. What we were doing was not so much a one-way evaluation but a conversation about how we were doing.

In our next discussion, Claire brought along a two page list of suggested questions for possible inclusion in the survey document. She thought we could ask volunteers to rate her in each area using a simple scale from excellent to needs improvement. I asked whether it might be more meaningful for people to write in personal comments in each of the areas in lieu of a rating. Hearing feedback in “a voice” might convey more meaning, I suggested. She agreed. When our attention turned to writing specific questions, she asked whether it might make sense to ask those commenting on her writing to share their suggestions for improving the Institute’s regular publications, since these were the documents they would be reviewing in commenting on Claire’s writing. “Great idea, let’s do it,” I responded.

We then turned to logistics, finalized the list of people to whom we would distribute the two questionnaires, one seeking writing feedback and one soliciting input on her other duties. This latter would go to staff members. I suggested that the cover note seeking participation in this process come from both of us. I asked if she wanted to draft the note. “No,” she said, with a little chuckle. I offered to draft something and to finalize the survey forms for her review

Claire seemed a little more anxious, less relaxed in this conversation. A couple times she said, “You know what’s best,” when we differed. This was a phrase she used frequently in our everyday interactions when our opinions differed, and it would be the concluding statement in our interaction. I would generally accept this and not encourage further exploration, even when I was not sure of my position.

At the end of the day, I gave her the cover note and two surveys to review. The next morning she came back with two refinements to the survey, which I immediately incorporated. Right before our conversation about her suggestions, I told her I had a few ideas for her. Thinking they probably related to the performance evaluation, she said with a laugh, “Not *more!*” Instead they dealt with a suggestion about a possible article for the Institute newsletter and a question. Would she like to host the June phone interview we had scheduled with a prominent physician member of the Institute who served as executive director of a healthcare quality improvement center at Harvard University? Claire had recently written a review of a book he authored. Institute members call in to listen to these conversations. She willingly accepted the invitation, while noting that she

did not have a great interview voice and had never participated in one of these calls. As we were wrapping up the conversation I asked, “Are we ready to go?” She replied, “Yep,” with a smile on her face. Later when I was stapling the questionnaires, she came over to the work counter and suggested one more name be added to our solicitation list.

Two days later at a staff meeting we distributed the surveys and one staff member asked about the completion deadline. We agreed on two weeks. This led me to ask that they spend some time thinking about their responses. Their value would depend upon the thoughtfulness of their responses. One of the staff members said, “Claire, I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised, so long as you bring in some fresh asparagus from your garden.” During this same period I contacted all the prospective writing reviewers: they all agreed to participate. I then sent them the survey form and once received, compiled the responses.

I was starting to feel more at ease in my interactions with Claire, better able to explore differences. I believe I understood her better and had a greater appreciation for her interests and skills. Our interactions had me thinking of new ways to tap Claire's talents in the work of the Institute. We had begun to significantly alter how we worked together. We shifted from patterns of interactions characterized by brief conversations, questions followed by definitive answers, and differences left unexplored to a pattern of more extended, frequent, and “finished” conversations and joint discovery. Together we crafted a somewhat novel evaluation process and shaped it until it felt right. There were no forced, premature conclusions. I enjoyed this work with Claire and *truly* looked forward to where it would lead.

### *The Performance Conversation*

I pulled two arm chairs away from the table so we could see each other’s expressions and body language and hopefully foster an informal conversation. Last week I had given Claire the two documents I had prepared which detailed the feedback we had obtained from writers and staff members. I asked that she reflect on this information, on her assessment of her performance, and on our working relationship, all in preparation for our “performance conversation”. As I prepared for our conversation I thought it would be a

good idea if she began the conversation, for her to make sense of the input received. Again, power differentials were on my mind.

We began at 10:00 am. After Claire sat down she asked which document we should review first: the writing or internal staff evaluation. I asked her to pick, and she went with the writer's feedback. Here is a sample of the input in the evaluation.

- “It is easy to make business writing dry. It is equally easy to make complexity theory impenetrable. Claire avoids both pitfalls.”
- “Claire is an engaging and clear writer. Better put, she is a good storyteller. She humanizes the topics by examples, adds credibility to her voice by citing appropriate experts, and provides good hooks to keep on reading.”
- “I find her writing style, however, somewhat dry, not really engaging. That may be because I don't really hear her voice in it. You can be informative and objective and still feel a person is there speaking to you...As a writer, I know the difficulty of her task, so it's hard for me to be critical. I guess I would like to get a sense of Claire enjoying what she writes, some color with the information. It's hard to describe. I don't know if this is helpful...”

Claire began by noting how grateful she was to these people for their input. I asked her to reflect on her writing work in the context of these assessments. The first point Claire brought up was the opinion that her writing was dry, lacking in a personal voice. She said, “For Plek publications it's not appropriate for my voice to be in the story” (another example of Claire's willingness to take a stand, to disagree...even in the face of a well-known writer, who also happens to be a Plek trustee). She then turned to the suggestion received from David, the consultant who edits the Institute's newsletter, that Claire add section titles throughout the stories she drafted and suggest pull-out quotes for display in the newsletter. “No editor would allow this,” Claire said with force and a laugh. Claire explained that by standard convention, writers do not recommend article or subsection titles for their submissions, and that she did not want to disrupt the nice back and forth pattern she and David had constructed. I asked, what if David asked for her to make these suggestions so he could gain a better feel for her sense of the story. Perhaps these

suggestions might not detract from their back and forth rhythm and his contributions to the stories. Something to think about, I offered.

At this point in our interaction, I noticed that Claire seemed at ease and fully engaged. She was leaning forward in her chair. So was I. The conversation seemed to have a spontaneous, natural flow.

In the feedback we received there were a number of suggestions about improving Institute publications. Soliciting them was Claire's idea. One suggestion had to do with including in each newsletter issue a primer on one aspect of complexity. We talked about this a bit and agreed it would be a good new feature for *emerging*. When we were about to leave the writing feedback conversation, I remembered one of the recommendations I did not understand.

- “She might consider attempting alternative styles and structures in her feature pieces. My only criticism is that they are a bit pat and predictable in overall approach. I suggest this with some hesitation, because standard forms are useful in dealing with non-standard topics. But I have no doubt she can grow in this way.”

Claire knew exactly what was meant and explained that the common style used for journalism writing was called the AP (Associated Press) convention. Using different “prisms” for stories Claire noted, was exactly what Tom Petzinger did in his book *The New Pioneers: The Men and Women Who Are Transforming the Workplace and the Marketplace* (Petzinger, 1999) and in his columns in *The Wall Street Journal*. This triggered an idea. “Why not ask Tom to explore different structures for some stories you have in the works?” “He is awfully busy,” Claire responded. “Do you think he’d do it?” she asked with glee. I said I thought he would. After all, he had already shown interest. As this phase of our conversation drew to a close, Claire observed, “I found these suggestions *very* helpful and agree with them.”

I can't recall why I brought up Griffin's book on leadership and ethics (Griffin, 2002) at this point, but I did and I mentioned the analysis he presented of the movie *Erin*

*Brokovich*. This movie was a drama about a court case which centered on serious illnesses in a community caused by ground water contaminated by toxic discharges from a large industrial plant. Griffin pointed out that no culpability was assigned in the movie to the plant workers, many of whom lived in the affected community, and the role they played in poisoning the ground water. “*He’s wrong,*” exclaimed Claire, referring to Griffin’s assertion. “It was the company’s leaders who were at fault. This led us into a discussion about Griffin’s assessment of how Kant’s writing had, over the years, led to a certain view of ethics, as something universal “out there” and to a general understanding of organizational and social systems as being all powerful and which *act on us*, as do leaders. This perspective, I observed, did not accord any significant role to people in organizations other than those at the top. I illustrated this with the example of our staff meeting in which Claire made a strong statement about her first performance evaluation. It took real courage to do this, I said, and it would have been easier to keep quiet than confront me, the leader. By expressing her thoughts, new possibilities were opened up. Perhaps because of a glimpse into Griffin’s thinking as a result of this explanation, Claire stated, “I like my job. Plek is an opportunity for me to make a difference both inside the organization and outside the organization on issues like AIDS and healthcare quality. Perhaps the things I do and the stories I write can contribute to this difference. I am going to pursue the primer idea for *emerging* and ask Tom to help me experiment with my writing style.”

We turned next to the comments received by staff colleagues. Claire immediately stated forcefully, “I don’t like the numbers.” She was referring to the overall numerical rating in the survey document. I had given her an eight on a one to ten scale. “I don’t know what this tells me.” I reminded her of our development of the survey form and her initial suggestion of a rating scale (poor, fair, very good, excellent) for all categories of performance and how we decided to do away with the scale and instead ask for written statements in response to some open ended questions. Our hope was to gain more specific information than could be communicated with a one word rating. I then told her that some of the feedback I received from her staff colleagues contained some one and two word responses and how I had gone back to them to ask them to elaborate, to convey more meaning. After further discussion we agreed that the numerical rating was probably not helpful. It was static, did not convey much meaning, and was open to very different



interpretations. Claire thought an eight out of ten was equivalent to failing; I saw it as a high rating.

Claire then went on to say she appreciated some of the nice things staff said about her.

- “Claire demonstrates a genuine interest and deep dedication to the people, work and science that guides Plek. Her curiosity and ideas make a real contribution to the Institute.”
- “Her willingness to bring up sensitive issues and speak directly about concerns is a special asset, one to be commended.”
- “Claire is *always* ready and willing to pitch in and help colleagues, with projects big and small. She never hesitates to offer and to assist.”

She took issue, however, with the comments made by all staff members about inaccurate entry of information into the Institute’s database. “We all make mistakes; perhaps part of the problem is confusion by frequent changes in database fields. It’s a bum rap!” She added that her reputation as a journalist depended on accuracy. I acknowledged this point and also shared an observation and posed a question. As a staff, we had not recently discussed this issue and I wondered why. I asked Claire if she thought it would be OK to explore the data entry accuracy matter in one of our staff meetings and also examine why this matter had not been raised. Claire responded by saying she thought this would be fine. She added that she does have a tendency to transpose numbers and brought up the time when she circulated an incorrect phone number for a board of trustees’ conference call and how badly she felt about this. She also told me how humiliated she felt when she overheard a previous staff member of Plek mention in a telephone conversation how she was prone to errors. “This matter has festered for three years,” she said.

As I reflected several days later while writing about our conversation, it struck me that I did not bring up in a forthright manner my observations about inaccurate entry of information in our database and the fact that I saw some validity in the survey responses. It occurred to me I was not being ethical. Her strong statement had silenced me and I chose to avoid conflict. And this was despite the fact that Claire and I had discussed the importance of raising and exploring differences. I decided to go back to Claire and speak more honestly about my thoughts and the reasons for my initial silence. Perhaps the

understandings Claire and I came to about more openly raising and working with difference are examples of what Griffin meant when he wrote of developing, through interaction and negotiation, a common understanding about ethical behavior.

Claire then changed the subject and noted that “one downside” with her job was the number of hours for which she was paid. When she was hired her hours were capped at twenty-nine per week. Thirty-three to thirty-five hours per week were needed, she said, to complete her work. She added that this did not count the hours she spent reading in the evening as she enjoyed this and would do it anyway. I responded by saying that I was glad she brought this up and that since our financial position was a little stronger now I would increase her paid hours. I asked her for the desired number. “Thirty-four would be great,” she said. “I *really* appreciate this,” she added with a thankful smile.

We jumped to another subject when Claire said she remembered a passage from *The Soul at Work* (Lewin & Regine, 1999) about a British nonprofit organization where employees were asked by leaders to articulate how they wished to contribute, based on their strengths, to the work of the organization. We went to the book case and found the story. As we flipped through the book we saw a subchapter heading called “Both/And” and laughed, a shared reaction triggered by our reading of Griffin and his treatment of Both/And thinking. Anyway, Claire stated that she wanted to pursue the idea of writing up contributions she would like to make to the mission of Plek.

### *Changing our View of What is Important*

This made me recount an observation that struck me a month or so into our performance evaluation design work: there were quite a number of unintended benefits from our joint effort. I told Claire I felt I knew her better, and appreciated her interests more and this, combined with our more frequent interactions, triggered new ideas for how her skills could be better used. She asked, “Like what?” Assuming responsibility for the Thursday Complexity Posts (electronic updates to Plek members on interesting developments in the field of complexity) and PlekCalls (conference calls between Plek members and complexity scientists) were examples I shared. “Claire,” I said, “you are doing an excellent job; these Plek services are better and timelier since you have taken over.” “And I really *love* doing them,” Claire replied.

I have a hunch one contributor to these unexpected benefits is the additional time we spent talking in more frequent and open-ended interactions. In the past, most of our conversations were brief and focused on a specific work issue. Claire added that she was reluctant to take up too much of my time given all I had to do and how absorbed I was in important activities. “Perhaps,” I reflected, “*we are changing our view of what is important.*”

Another jump in the conversation took place when Claire stated that she had dreaded the evaluation day, but that “everything seemed to be going OK.” She did not like the number stuff and did not feel she was qualified to comment on the performance of other staff members, especially in areas where she had no insight. She added that it had been very difficult for her to share her observations about my performance with Carol Dengler, the Plek board member who coordinated my performance evaluation. She said it was really awkward. She then asked me what I thought about our working relationship now. “It is much more interesting, full of new possibilities, more alive and personally meaningful,” I responded.

Next Claire mentioned she was “*really touched*” when I gave her a copy of Doug Griffin’s book. She added that she found the reading difficult. I concurred, but noted that ideas explored in this work affected how I approached the evaluation process. I thought she might like to know about the insights that informed my thinking and actions. Plus I thought she would simply be interested in the concepts explored in the book.

It surprised me that this gift had such an impact, but it was clear from Claire’s words and the look on her face that it did. This would seem to be another example of nonlinearity, where a small change triggered a large, disproportionately large change.

Recalling this took me back to the conversations Claire and I had about the difficulties involved in judging others and expressing these assessments. I made a comment suggesting that the challenge encountered in such actions probably stemmed from not being able to predict, with any degree of certainty, the consequences. Yet, expressing differences seemed a crucial ingredient in change. I went, by way of example, through the flow of our evaluation journey:

- my request for feedback on performance from the board;
- input from staff which helped me gain new insights into my behavior;
- sharing the results with the staff;
- her comment in the staff meeting about her humiliating performance review;
- my request for volunteers to help design a review process;
- her offer to be the first volunteer;
- my idea of crafting a process together that had meaning for her.

Next, Claire wondered if Plek members were getting what they deserved for their \$100 membership fee. “Is it a fair exchange?” she asked. It was a question certainly worth exploring, I noted, and we could definitely come up with a better overall membership offering and solicitation process. I asked if she would like to work on our membership plan. She responded with an enthusiastic yes. As we wrapped up, I asked if we could spend some time during our next meeting reflecting on what we learned in our work over the past couple months on the evaluation process and how this could inform how we worked together on a regular basis. We could also talk about her write-up on the new contributions she wanted to make to the Institute.

Claire then stated, “I *really* appreciated the conversation today and feel you are much more approachable, even though you are consumed with important work.” I thanked her for helping me better understand what is important. As we got up from our chairs, I realized our conversation had lasted two hours. “Wow, how time flew by,” I remarked.

As I thought about this conversation I was struck by how far we roamed beyond what was typically expected in a performance evaluation and what I anticipated. We explored some scholarly literature, created a new process for approaching evaluations, deepened our understanding of one another, enhanced our working relationship, generated new ideas for the work of the Institute, broadened our ability to talk about sensitive subjects and our understanding of why it is so difficult to do so, and solved some problems. These types of benefits are not anticipated in the management literature on performance assessment. The areas of attention in this literature focus only on the individual, control, and personal development.

- Judgment on performance, “telling a subordinate how he is doing”(Grote, 1996, p. 3).
- Appraisals as a process to affect the performance of individuals (Mohrman, Resnick-West, & Lawler, 1989).
- Holding attention, directing activity, and achieving organizational control (Bruns & McKinnon, 2005).
- Being clear on what is expected of employees, documenting performance, and communicating findings (Bacal, 2004).
- “Correcting or adjusting performance when...measures indicate that change is needed” (Mohrman, Resnick-West, & Lawler, 1989, p. 5).

I was beginning to believe that Claire and I had created a new relationship that affected us both, a relationship we neither planned nor intended. Elias puts it this way:

...the basic tissue resulting from many single plans and actions of man can give rise to change and patterns that no individual person has planned or created. From the interdependence of people arises an order sui generis, an order more compelling and stronger than the will and reason of the individual people composing it.

(Elias, 1998, p. 150)

This became clearer to me in a follow-up conversation we had several weeks later. We had set up this meeting to explore two subjects: ideas she had for making new contributions to Plek and reflections on the process we had created. Without hesitation Claire began by noting that she had not had time to write about her new contribution ideas, but had a “draft list” in her mind. Among the items she covered were:

- identifying more stories for Plek publications and improving her writing by using the feedback received from her writing reviewers;
- learning about online publishing (a week earlier we had met with a Plek board member who suggested we publish some books related to the conferences we sponsor);
- taking a course on grant writing so she could be more helpful in attracting foundation and government support;

- becoming more technically savvy; and
- starting a complexity book club.

“And,” she said excitedly, jumping out of her chair and running to her desk, “you have to see this article from *The Wall Street Journal*.” She pointed to a front page piece about how exposure to very minute, seemingly innocuous amounts of certain chemicals could have a very significant impact on human health. This topic, of the potentially major affect on health of a very small change, was being explored by a learning network on clinical practice recently formed by the Institute. She mentioned she planned to share her finding with the network. “Why don’t we get an online subscription so we can easily share such articles,” I stated.

I was pleased by Claire’s offers and told her so. I mentioned her suggestions were wonderful junctures between her interests and the work of Plek. She offered to write up her ideas in some detail so we could consider them in more depth.

We moved to another subject when I asked her to compare her initial evaluation with the present one. “There is *no comparison*,” she said with strength and immediacy. “And our relationship has changed too. You sat at your desk, I sat at mine.” Claire continued by noting how happy she was with the writing feedback. She concluded by saying, “The one negative was when I was asked to judge you. I was uncomfortable with this and the anonymity of the process. It was awkward.” This led me to reflect on our previous conversation about the importance, even though difficult, of raising sensitive issues since this offers the possibility of change. I brought up the results of my evaluation as an example and observed that we seemed to be coming to an ethical agreement about how to handle difficult issues.

In this regard, I confided to Claire that I felt I had “let her down” in our previous meeting by not honestly sharing my view about her tendency to enter inaccurate information in our database. Her strong reaction and her valid points about the impact of confounding factors, I explained, had silenced me. She asked me for an example of an incorrect data entry. I couldn’t think of one so I made a general comment about data in incorrect fields. This led me to observe it might be healthier if we raised concerns as they were occurring, so the experience would be fresh in mind. We both observed how infrequently this

happens in the office and agreed that we should bring this issue up, along with the database issue for conversation with the whole staff.

I then told Claire a bit about the writing I was doing for the DMan program and how it dealt with how I think about and participate in interactions surrounding matters at work. “Sounds like *torture*,” Claire said. I admitted it was unsettling and painful at times to examine my actions and unearth unseen and unexamined patterns of behavior. These times were also rewarding. In fact, I told Claire that our work together on the performance evaluation was among the most personally meaningful experiences in my career. I noted that what we had done could make a contribution to management thinking. Much of the literature I had found on the topic was based on old conceptions of management and dealt with cosmetic fixes for processes that were widely viewed as unsatisfactory. Very few scholars, I observed, challenged the assumptions upon which the standard process rested or paid attention to relationships, power, and ongoing conversations. Claire, who had done some reading in preparation for our work, was more pointed. “It’s awful, it’s drivel, worse than primitive!” She added a comment about a fear she had when we started out on our new process. “Oh my god, we’re going to make a big to-do, an elaborate bureaucratic process, a horror show.”

As I wrote about this conversation, I was struck by the expressiveness and passion in Claire’s words. I began to wonder if this strong language, while sometimes opening up new possibilities also closes down some when met with my silence. I sense that my effort to reduce the perceived power differential and establish a better relationship with Claire produces some unintended consequences. Perhaps in selected circumstances I need to shift the power differential and insist in clear language that valid criticism be examined and the pattern of deflected criticism be acknowledged and explored.

Claire went on by saying, “It hasn’t been so bad. In truth, it has been useful. We know each other better; the distance between us has been reduced. I find it easier to approach you.” This led me to raise the topic of my paper again and ask Claire if she would like to do some writing together. Her feelings and insights into the evaluation process we designed would certainly expand my perspective. And together, I surmised, we could make some fresh, and needed, contributions to the management field. I asked how she

would feel if one of my papers for the doctorate program dealt with my experience with the evaluation work. “This is *absolutely* fine.” Claire exclaimed.

As we were finishing, Claire offered to give more thought to the new contributions she would like to make to Plek and put them on paper. She also stated she would try to do some writing on her reflections about our work together and how our relationship was changing. “It’s been very interesting,” she said as she stood up.

In a recent publication edited by Griffin and Stacey, Andrew Lee contributed a chapter on leading and coaching (Lee, 2005). The editor’s introduction to the chapter speaks to a change in relationship between Lee and a subordinate employee that parallels the change I experienced with Claire. In his narrative of a conversation with two people who report to him, Lee describes how he dealt with what many would regard as a challenge to his authority. By paying attention to the risk his subordinate was taking in confronting him and understanding something of the implications of shifting power relations, he continued to engage in a way that enabled further meaning to be made. What began as a challenge to his authority became a small transformation of the relationship between the two of them.

David had taken a significant risk in intervening strongly, and we were awoken from our co-created patterns of disengagement to a way of working that felt risky and unknowable. David’s remark shifted the patterns of power-relating and caused us to find a different way of being together. In addition, the relationship between David and me shifted. I now see him as stronger and more passionate about his work. He recognizes my desire to explore the immediacy of our experience rather than to think about the past to describe what ‘should’ and ‘ought’ to happen in the future. I feel that we have more robust conversations without preparation and that our identities have shifted as we now see each other in a different way.

(Lee, 2005, p. 152)

*Back To Assumptions, Now Questioned*



As I reflected further on this entire experience with Claire, it made me seriously question the validity of, and see as seriously incomplete many of the assumptions upon which standard employee performance evaluation processes are based. To justify this conclusion I will return with a critical eye to the assumptions described earlier in this paper.

- Leaders can foresee the employee behavior and skills critical to the success of organizations and identify opportunities for employee performance improvement. Leaders are the primary engine of change and are not themselves affected by the evaluation.

Most of the progress Claire and I made as a result of our performance conversations I neither anticipated nor planned. While I had hoped that we would improve our working relationship, I had no idea if or how this would happen. The progress we made was crafted together and came through our interactions. Much of the progress was surprising. I had no idea that one of the central developments would deal with the ethics surrounding how we dealt with “awkward” issues. I had no idea she would spontaneously volunteer to identify new contributions she could make to the work of the Institute. And I certainly had no sense as we embarked that this little project would turn into one of the most learning-filled of my career and that our relationship would improve so dramatically.

On the issue of data entry accuracy, one area where several staff and I had hoped for improvement, it is not yet known if any real progress will be made and it is clear that more work was needed. Claire’s continuing unwillingness to own any meaningful part of the problem and my inability to assert my viewpoint strongly left this issue – and how we deal with it – outstanding.

- The behavior of individuals is essentially an independent activity and can, with effort, be isolated and objectively understood by managers.

I found that feedback on individual performance can be useful if viewed from a particular light. From both my experience with the board review of my performance and my work with Claire, I found observations from others valuable, if considered as bases for conversation and for making sense (not as truth or objective information) and if received with a responsive orientation. For example, my understanding of the complexity of the

accurate data base entry issue grew as a result of our exploration. I found that while I did not enter the conversation with a complete and fully-understood picture of the situation, I was able to remain open (responsive) to seeing the problem more fully.

I discovered that the value of feedback increased if it came from a variety of informed people. The value came in two forms: when input pointed to patterns of repetitive behavior (like the criticism of me by Institute employees) and from the occasional different view (like the assessment of Claire's writing as being too dry).

A more central observation was the recognition that most issues of importance within our organization involved several people, who together created a pattern of behavior and were thus interdependent. The mode of working together Claire and I developed was a prime example, as was the unresolved data accuracy issue. If we had not been able or willing to examine how we worked together or interacted, little progress would have been possible. Harking back to Claire's first performance evaluation helps one appreciate this point more fully.

- Organizational performance is heavily dependent on the behavior of individuals.

One could repeat many of the above points in commenting on this assumption. No appreciation and little attention in the performance evaluation literature are given to how people work together and the many factors that affect how people relate in organizations, such as context, historical patterns, power differentials, and habits of everyday conversation. When Claire and I explored the database accuracy issue we saw a multitude of issues and people involved. As we kept up our stream of conversations we witnessed many surprises, from our developing understanding of how to deal with differences and sensitive subjects, to the unanticipated import of small gestures like the gift of Griffin's book, and to our evolving, and improving, relationship. These realities and surprises came through interaction, not from the actions of independent individuals. In this experience, organizational performance seems highly linked to the behavior of individuals in relationships.

- If feedback on performance and guidance on the means to improve unsatisfactory performance are provided, desired changes in individual

performance will result. Behavior change can be reliably managed and is primarily a solitary endeavor. The evaluating manager provides feedback and guidance and the employee determines how to achieve the prescribed change.

Feedback may or, many times, may *not* result in desired change. Humiliating Claire and souring our relationship were not what I intended in her initial evaluation. I suspect that the original assessment of her inaccurate data entry did not lead to improvements either, since many of the needed changes were beyond her purview. As Claire and I experienced, change is much more complex than the simple cause-effect process uncritically advanced in standard performance evaluation systems. We realized that our ongoing interactions changed both of us and our relationship *at the same time* and that these changes began to occur when we started genuinely working together on an approach to the evaluation process. Here we were not separating thought from action, as in the above assumption, but rather acting our way into a new pattern of relating. This experience was in line with Griffin's observation: "There is therefore no possibility of knowing how to judge the outcome of action before acting, since the future is being constructed in the interaction" (Griffin, 2002, p. 15).

- Meaningful and lasting improvements in employee behavior will follow from what in many circumstances is a single annual, planned evaluation session.

It is clearly unrealistic to expect meaningful, productive change to stem from a single or even several planned interactions. Claire and I saw change come from a *series* of related conversations and from the accumulation of numerous small actions which built upon one another. We also came to appreciate that one can never know when a new insight or *surprise* will emerge. They do not appear on schedule or upon request. It was these surprises or turning points which, when noticed and responded to, led over time to the most significant changes. By holding ongoing conversations, and not viewing the process as finished at any pre-determined time, we provided more opportunities for surprises to surprise us.

- A uniform and orderly process is appropriate for all employees.

I experienced great value in working together with Claire to craft a performance evaluation process that was *unique* and meaningful for her. I believe my offer to jointly design how we would proceed reduced the perceived power differential between us, helped insure we factored in what mattered to her (the writing feedback for example), and served as an important step towards a new pattern of interaction that stood us well as we moved into the process. This pattern included openness to going where the process and our conversations took us. We had no fixed template in mind; we improvised. Our conversations became more spontaneous and flowing. Perhaps we experienced what Winnicott (Winnicott, 1971) called “good enough holding” when trusting interactions enable creative, flowing conversations (Stacey, 2003a). This experience led me to believe there is value to be gained by tailoring the evaluation process around the needs and particular circumstances of individual employees and managers and to view with skepticism the convention of applying one process to all.

### *A Few Offerings from Experience*

In addition to this critique of assumptions underlying conventional performance evaluations, my experience with Claire prods me to share several additional reflections for those involved in rethinking performance evaluation systems or participating in evaluations.

- Stay in responsive conversation and alert for small changes.
- Embrace diversity and interactions in their many forms.
- Think of power as dynamic.

As I reflected on the significant shifts in the working relationship between Claire and me, I sensed the importance of numerous, seemingly *small moments and changes*. These came about because we continued in conversation over several months, followed productive themes over time, and generally remained responsive to each other and to the ideas that emerged. This same dynamic process produced several large changes, which when they appeared seemed insignificant. Their importance became apparent over time. The gift of the book; feedback from writers; a meaningful evaluation for you. Together these small changes represented a transformation from a routine, predictable and not too

lively relationship to one more spirited, dynamic, variable and complex in its scientific meaning.

Ary Goldberger, one of the world's leading researchers on complexity science and human physiology, called attention to similar contrasting patterns when he wrote about dynamics associated with disease and health.

The emergence of highly periodic dynamics in many disease states is one of the most compelling examples of the notion of *complexity loss* in disease. Complexity here refers specifically to the fractal-type variability in function and structure that generates scale-invariance (self-similarity) and long-range organization. As a general principle, disease states are marked by less complex dynamics than healthy states. Indeed, this decomplexification of systems with disease may be a defining feature of pathology. When physiologic systems lose their fractal complexity, their information content is degraded. As a result they are less adaptable and less able to cope with the exigencies of a constantly and unpredictably changing environment. To generate information, a system must behave in an unpredictable fashion. In contrast, a highly predictable, regular output is information-poor, since it monotonously repeats its activity.

(Goldberger, 1997, p. 547)

Other prominent complexity scientists point our attention to instabilities, bifurcations, and small perturbations as essential to innovation and flexibility in living systems (Kelso, 1995; Nicolis & Prigogine, 1989; Prigogine, 1996). Stacey and Griffin brought these concepts into the social realm when they observed, "Healthy, creative, ordinarily effective human interaction is then always complex.... Patterns of human relating that lose this complexity become highly repetitive and rapidly inappropriate for dealing with the fluidity of ordinary, everyday life..." (Stacey & Griffin, 2005, p. 7).

A number of scholars explore the pattern of outcomes in complex systems stemming from the types of complex dynamics noted above by Goldberger, Kelso, Prigogine, Stacey and Griffin. They point to the tendency of numerous complex physical, biological, and social systems to exhibit inverse power law dynamics (also called  $1/f$  phenomena (Barabasi & Bonabeau, 2003; Beltz & Kello, 2005; West & Deering, 1995). An inverse

power law “picture” suggests the “absence of any fundamental scale” (West & Deering, 1995, p. 135). Simply put, an inverse power law depicts a distribution spectrum characterized by many small units (of sizes, frequencies, changes, etc.), fewer intermediate units, and a very low number of large units. The frequency of these units shows a mathematical relationship which produces a straight line with a negative slope on a log-log graph. An inverse power law is seen in many arenas, from income distribution to the spectrum of earthquake sizes, heart rate variability, frequency of word use, size of social networks, neural network connections, and city sizes. West says that “the evidence seems to indicate that the  $1/f$ – behavior of a phenomenon is related to its complexity irrespective of the context” (West & Deering, 1995, pp. 138-139).

It is hypothesized that the various processes which generate power law distributions in different systems are fractal in nature (Beltz & Kello, 2005; West & Deering, 1995). This means, for example, that processes which are similar produce both very large and very small earthquakes. Moving to the issue explored in this paper, the working relationship between Claire and me, I can see we moved to a pattern of interaction which produced changes, most of them small and a few of greater significance. I also have a sense that the process which generated these various changes, free-flowing conversation, may be fractal. While each conversation is by no means identical, the dynamics of relating exhibit similarities over time. I do not claim that the distribution of changes produced by our interactions displays an inverse power law, though this does seem conceivable, but rather observe that my experience corresponded with the notion that a single, underlying process, which is self-similar as it is iterated over time, led to changes of many sizes and degrees of significance.

Many of the changes Claire and I experienced and the understandings which made some of them possible were fed by *diverse* interactions, ideas and input. This diversity was found in many ways and forms.

- Literature and science – Claire and I reviewed an array of literature on performance evaluation, complexity science, and complex responsive processes.
- Performance feedback – We solicited performance input from numerous and different sources.

- Multiple conversations – Claire spoke with colleagues in the office and I interacted with Plek trustees and doctoral program classmates and faculty.
- Exploration of issues – Conversations between us on the broad variety of issues and insights which emerged during the process.

This rich diversity produced fresh fodder for our deliberations: the notion of the ongoing negotiation of ethics, for example. It also enabled us to make fuller sense of what was going on, to see the unseen: appreciating Claire's strength and deflection tendencies, for example.

While writing about diversity it came to me that in a number of instances *time* served as an ally of diversity. Because we did not confine our performance conversations to a single event, but viewed our explorations as an ongoing activity, time became a contributor. Periodically through the process, with a brew of diverse ideas in mind, a new connection would be made. One which comes to mind was the realization that I had not abided by the understanding Claire and I were developing around "awkward" issues when I did not speak frankly about my observations on the data base problem. This insight and the companion decision to revisit this issue came to me several days after the initial conversation and with a variety of thoughts in mind: Griffin's notion of ethics; the importance of difference in the change process; and our mutual desire to "speak the awkward."

Time also brought dynamics into play. As Claire and I began our project I had a single-minded desire to reduce the power differential Claire experienced in our interactions. I sought a different relationship and was pleased to witness, as Claire felt freer and more assured, encouraging results as our interactions became more open, relaxed, and creative. Until it was pointed out to me, I was not aware that it also enabled an avoidance of the data base problem and outright rejection of some criticism and viewpoints. Anxious to maintain a newly found relationship with Claire, it had not occurred to me that I would need to assert some authority and insist that an unwelcome concern be pursued, not deflected. Such a move would represent a shift on the power spectrum in the other direction. This experience brought home to me the importance of thinking about power dynamically; to remain poised to nudge power differentials in either direction and to stay

alert for unintended consequences of these moves. Here again the central role of variability showed itself.

It's been a while now since I last heard, "You know what's best" or I gave a curt answer to a question calling for exploration. However, it is clear that our negotiation over new patterns of working together is unfinished and not always understood. To be continued...

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## PROJECT THREE

### **The Link between Patterns of Relationships among Board Members and the Move of a Voluntary Organization beyond Start-up**

Submitted March 2006

Creating a new organization is difficult. Sustaining and helping a young organization grow – by adjusting to unforeseen circumstances, changing practices, engaging new people, improving services, and dealing with inevitable surprises – is much more difficult. No wonder most new organizations have a short life span.

This paper will explore the efforts in one organization over the course of a year to move beyond start-up. It will chronicle the experience and changing perceptions and practices of the author, the chief executive officer of the organization, and his account of collaborative efforts with members of the board of trustees to deal with some of the challenges of institutional growth and survival. This undertaking and the account of it are informed by two bodies of thought: the life cycle thinking of mainstream management and a growing body of scholarship developing within the domains of complexity science, the complex responsive processes theory of Ralph Stacey, and the sociological perspective of Norbert Elias. This scholarship and the sense I make of my experience represent a significant and radical challenge to traditional frameworks for understanding the issues involved in moving beyond start-up and the prescriptions offered for how to deal with these issues. Through this project I have come to believe that the challenge of moving beyond start-up is actually compounded, in many cases, by the mistaken assumptions and misguided directions for managing small firm growth, and, significantly, what is ignored in the mainstream management literature.

Through this project, and by taking my experience seriously, I have come to perceive issues in organizations differently, to question and change some of my taken-for-granted practices, and become more fascinated with and engaged in the complexities of life in organizations.

*One Pattern*

We had settled into a pattern. The board of trustees of Plek Institute did most of its business on conference calls. One face-to-face board meeting was held each year. Funds were limited so it was hard to cover travel costs for trustees, who were spread throughout North America, to attend meetings. There was a heavy reliance on several active trustees who made themselves available to the staff, participated in many Plek activities, served on an Executive Committee which “met” via conference calls throughout the year, and made contributions of many kinds. The work of the Institute was heavily dependent on the work and thinking of one full-time executive – me. A trustee submitted the following comment during the course of my performance evaluation earlier in the year: “It is clear that Plek would not exist without him or that it would have turned into a different animal. The flip side of it is that Plek, because it is so dependent on Curt, is too much a reflection of who Curt is.” Plek is a relatively young organization, in business for three and one-half years. Like other small, start-up organizations its operations are shaped by a small number of people and by the orientations, experiences, and early patterns of interaction they create. Conceivably some trustees were sensing the limitation of reliance on such a small number of “founding” people, in both accomplishing the work of the organization and how the work was approached. While some progress was made through this combination, board members and I yearned to make greater strides toward fulfilling the purpose of the Institute: improving the health of individuals, families, communities, organizations, and the natural environment by helping people use insights emerging for the new science of complexity.

Plek is a non-profit, charitable organization incorporated in the United States. It is governed by a board of trustees comprised of thirteen individuals who serve without compensation, volunteering their time because they believe in the mission of the Institute. Plek began operating in late 2001. Much of the work of the organization is devoted to improving the provision of healthcare and the management of healthcare organizations. In the U.S., as in many developed countries, there is increasing dissatisfaction with the quality of services and the high rate of medical errors (Institute of Medicine, 2001). Despite considerable effort to address these challenges, problems persist. Many people involved in Plek believe these difficulties are attributable in part to outmoded management practices and methods for improving quality such as total quality management and continuous quality improvement. They sense from personal experience

that insights and practices inspired by complexity science could spur progress on these seemingly intractable problems.

The pattern of dependence on a limited number of trustees and staff was first explored at a meeting of the board held in March 2005 at the home of the board chair, Bob Graber. Sensing some of the promising opportunities facing the Institute, such as the introduction of complexity science concepts into nursing education and use of positive deviance, a social change process, on some challenging healthcare quality problems, trustees decided it was time to take a risk and invest some of the organization's limited funds to hire a senior healthcare leader. Such an individual could provide high-level support for these opportunities as well as serve as a staff partner for me. At the same gathering another decision was reached. It stemmed from a late night informal, standing-around-the-kitchen discussion among several trustees who were staying overnight at Bob's home. The idea: each trustee should get involved in an important activity or two of the Institute as well as being fully engaged in the work of a more active Board. The next day this suggestion was taken up and embraced during the official meeting.

Those present thought the addition of an experienced staff person, more frequent and extended conversations among trustees, more "hands" involved in key development activities of Plek, deeper relationships among trustees and staff, and the consideration of more and different voices in making sense of current operations and making plans for the future would enable the Institute to make greater progress. As the meeting ended, there was heightened energy and enthusiasm.

Gedajlovic and colleagues, in an article about threshold firms (young organizations seeking to grow and avoid stagnation), observed that many "founder-managed firms" are likely to fail because they "strongly reflect the expertise and personality of their founder" (Gedajlovic, Lubatkin, & Schulze, 2004, p. 902). While recognizing that the skills of the founder enabled the organization to innovate and successfully enter the marketplace, "these advantages come bundled with offsetting and sometimes toxic disabilities that tend to accumulate over time" (Gedajlovic, Lubatkin, & Schulze, 2004, p, 902). To cross the threshold, firms are advised to alter their governance structure, replace the founder with professional managers, and change the "artifacts engendered by the founder-managed governance" (Gedajlovic, Lubatkin, & Schulze, 2004, p. 908). Artifacts include

processes, values, routines, and deeply engrained patterns. Gedadjlovic contends these artifacts are more difficult to change than the management arrangements.

Like the mythical figure Icarus whose wax wings led him to fly so high that his wings melted, successful firms also possess capabilities which at first lead to success, but which invariably sow the seeds of their own decline.

(Gedajlovic, Lubatkin, & Schulze, 2004, p. 906)

*Life Cycles in Organizations: What Mainstream Literature Says*

Earlier management writing, taken from the organizational life cycle literature, offers similar assessments and prescriptions. The life cycle view, heavily influenced by Chandler's classic work, *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the American Industrial Enterprise* (Chandler, 1962), assumes that organizations which survive go through a standard and predictable set of development phases and, during transitions between phases characterized as crises or revolutions, adopt specific new management capabilities to move to the next stage of development. Churchill's writing, in what is considered a landmark article, would suggest that Plek is moving towards the "Success-Growth Substage" where the challenge is to marshal "resources for growth" and to hire managers with "an eye on the company's future" (Churchill & Lewis, 1983, pp. 34-35).

Another influential writer, Greiner, saw organizational growth as alternating between stable and revolutionary periods and the key to moving through the revolutionary period as finding the right set of new organizational practices.

...we can identify a series of developmental phases through which companies tend to pass as they grow. Each phase begins with a period of evolution with steady growth and stability, and ends with a revolutionary period of substantial turbulence and change...The resolution of each revolutionary period determines whether or not a company will move forward to the next stage of evolutionary growth.

(Greiner, 1972, p. 38)

In the early stages of organizational life, Phase 1 - Creativity and Phase 2 - Direction, he advocated the installation of “strong business managers” and the increased delegation to subordinates (Greiner, 1972, p. 42). Zahra calls for the replacement of the founder or supplementing him or her with “capable professional management” (Zahra & Filatotchev, 2004, p. 889).

Such prescriptions, and their underlying assumptions about organizational development and life cycles, are common in the management literature. Flamholtz and Randle are particularly definitive. “A company’s life cycle *has* (italics added) seven stages of growth” (Flamholtz & Randle, 2000, p. 28).

Senior managers...can assist the company in making a smooth transition from one stage of growth to the next by following four steps. Step 1: Perform an organizational evaluation or audit....Step 2: Formulate an organizational development plan...Steps 3 and 4: Implement the organizational development plan and monitor its progress.

(Flamholtz & Randle, 2000, p 43)

Current research continues the life cycle tradition and the assumption that young entrepreneurial firms must bring in new managers to successfully move forward (Boeker & Wiltbank, 2005).

Most attention in the life cycle literature is on management; very little is written about boards of directors and their role in the early phases of organizational life. Pettigrew writes,

Whilst the 1980s has witnessed a burgeoning of popular and scholarly interest in the contribution of top leaders to the fate of organizations, this preoccupation ...has not been complemented by equivalent scholarly concern with the study of boards of directors.

(Pettigrew, 1992, p. 169)

What is written about boards in many ways reflects what is written about management. Lynall views the role of boards from a life cycle perspective and suggests that boards of

directors need to fulfill different roles as the organization moves through different life cycle stages (Lynall, Golden, & Hillman, 2003). Other writing deals with the theme of changing board composition as a means of dealing with new needs (Huse, 2000), reminding one of the calls for management changes in moving from one life cycle stage to the next.

The pattern that emerges in the conventional life cycle literature has common themes:

- organizations grow in a series of predictable stages, from one relatively stable period to the next;
- organizations move successfully through these phases if they adopt certain management practices appropriate for the particular stage;
- a heavy focus on individuals, primarily the founder and CEO, in navigating the early stages of growth; and
- management and the board are thought of as if they operated independently and little significance is afforded the work of the board and interactions with management.

I am skeptical about the broad relevance of this literature for increasing understanding of the process Plek is involved in as it grows beyond start-up. It is not my sense that Plek is on a *pre-programmed path* that will be realized if we simply make the prescribed moves at defined crisis points. It feels more complex and uncertain than this. The life cycle literature on young firms provides no insight into how decisions are reached and simply assumes my actions as founder and CEO are primary. In Plek, board members are involved and their actions and conversations among themselves and with me matter. Our explorations about moving beyond start-up did not stem from our sense of being in crisis. It seemed like we were merely doing the regular work, being good stewards of an organization we cared about. We found that our new plans emerged from conversational processes involving both me and board members.

A more thorough examination of the life cycle literature and of the significance of a process and conversational orientation in moving beyond start-up will be conducted later in this paper after more of the Plek story is told.

The mainstream management literature on small firm growth is essentially *mute* on the processes followed in navigating ways forward and on how decisions are reached in young, small firms. What one finds, however, are a few caution flags and questions about the conventional management wisdom on moving beyond start-up.

Hanks observes that most of the life cycle literature has not been empirically validated and simply accepts Chandler's basic model. His studies suggest the existence of many more stages of development and "greater levels of complexity in the pattern of growth-stage configurations" (Hanks et al., 1993, p. 11). Lowe and Hanson go further and question whether a general model of growth and development for small firms could ever exist, citing the dynamic and differing nature of small firms and the environments in which they operate (Lowe & Henson, 2004). Joined by a few other authors (Davidsson & Wilkund, 2000; Hanks, Watson, Jansen, & Chandler, 1993), they point out that despite all the writing and research on entrepreneurial and small to medium sized firms, there is very little understanding of the dynamics of growth in small businesses. "...knowledge about what facilitates and hinders growth is still scattered and limited today. The same is true for insights into the processes of firm growth" (Davidsson & Wilkund, 2000, p. 26).

Like Davidsson's call for research on management processes related to firm growth, there is a call from a few scholars to research processes that affect board performance (Forbes & Milliken, 1999; Huse, 2000; Pettigrew, 1992; Westphal, 1998). Huse represents this view in a review article.

Research on boards of directors are generally studies of relationship between input and output, but the substance of input and output, as well as what is happening in between is still underexplored.

(Huse, 2000, pp. 3-4)

In an interesting twist, Westphal studied the relationship between management and the board and the impact of this relationship on organizational performance. His findings, which highlight the interdependence of boards and CEOs, "suggest that more attention might be devoted to reforming the processes for CEO – board interaction rather than (or in addition to) board structure" (Westphal, 1998, p. 531). Westphal's research indicates that efforts to increase board power and independence from management counter-

intuitively achieve the opposite results because of compensating moves by CEOs to activate informal, personal influence with directors.

### *An Alternative Literature*

This set of circumstances – an experience in a young organization which the life cycle literature does not appear to adequately explain and a series of questions posed about small firm processes and dynamics – calls for a turn to alternative scholarship.

Complexity science and the extensive writings about human organizing of sociologist Norbert Elias and organizational theorist Ralph Stacey will be examined for insights.

Elias would understand the dual focus in the life cycle literature on individuals (replace the CEO, change membership on the board) and the organization (viewing the start-up organization as if it was alive and had a natural course through the life cycle) as common conceptions of how society and the role of individuals are understood. Writing in *The Society of Individuals*, Elias saw two opposing camps (Elias, 1991). One viewed the formation of human organizations as resulting from the intentions of a few individuals; the other camp saw essentially no role for the individual. People were simply cogs in a “supra-individual organic entity” which moved predictably through a set of life stages, from birth to maturity and death (Elias, 1991, p. 4). His call for new attention to how people actually come together and organize presaged the call by the organizational theorists cited above who suggested that a process and relational orientation be pursued for understanding life in start-up firms.

What we lack – let us freely admit it – are conceptual models and an overall vision by which we can make comprehensible in thought what we experience daily in reality, by which we could understand how a large number of individuals form with each other something that is more than a collection of separate individuals – how they form a “society”, and how it comes about that this society can change in specific ways, that it has a history which takes a course which has not been intended or planned by any of the individuals making it up.

(Elias, 1991, p. 7)



Instead of a focus on individuals, societies and life cycles, Elias called attention to interdependency, networks and figurations, which he defined as structures of “mutually orientated dependent people” (Elias, 1998, p. 482). He challenged the predilection to view individuals and groupings of individuals as having distinct, separate existences and advanced a view that saw change, or what he called structural transformation, as involving simultaneously these dual aspects of human beings, as individuals and collections of individuals, societies. Both “have the character of processes, and there is not the slightest necessity in forming theories about human beings, to abstract from this process-character” (Elias, 1998, p. 455).

For me, this orientation was in evidence during the March board meeting. From the dance of conversation among those attending, from the process of interacting and the interweaving of intentions and ideas of those present came a new direction that was unexpected and not under the control of any individuals and certainly not a consequence of an organization moving inexorably from one stage of a life cycle to the next.

As Elias was writing, a few natural scientists were beginning to explore how order and change come about in complex systems (Goldberger, 1997; Holland, 1995; Kauffman, 1995; Kelso, 1995; Nicolis & Prigogine, 1989; Prigogine, 1996; Prigogine & Stengers, 1984). Like Elias, these scholars focused on interactions among interdependent agents. The process through which order and change emerge they termed self-organization. Complex systems were seen as healthy and adaptable when they exhibited far-from-equilibrium (also called edge of chaos and bounded instability) dynamics where order and disorder coexisted. When these dynamics were present, small instabilities, perturbations or differences may ripple through the system and lead to new patterns of organization, as when laminar flow moves to turbulence or when a disease goes into remission. Ilya Prigogine, the Nobel Prize winning chemist, was one of the first natural scientists to appreciate this process. He wrote in 1984:

...certain fluctuations, instead of regressing, may be amplified and invade the entire system, compelling it to evolve toward a new regime that may be qualitatively different from the stationary states.

(Prigogine & Stengers, 1984, p. 140)

This self-organizing process, in which small changes may trigger novel patterns, suggests the future behavior of complex systems is inherently unpredictable and that these forms do not emerge as the result of any predetermined plan or path. Remember the unplanned conversation at Bob's home that led to the idea of a more active board? It was a surprise, emerging from conversation among interdependent agents.

Ralph D. Stacey and colleagues, in developing the theory of complex responsive processes, a view of human organizing informed by complexity science and the scholarship of Elias and G. H. Mead, would likely see the life cycle literature as an example of the dominant discourse in management and an outgrowth of systems thinking (Stacey, 2007). From this orientation comes an understanding of the life cycle prescription with its two-level focus on individuals and the organization that parallels Elias' observation. Leaders in a firm are considered autonomous individuals and the organization is considered something above and outside the individual with its own life and characteristics (Stacey, 2007). From this emerges a perspective on change that focuses on decisions of senior leaders in achieving a move to the next stage of the life cycle. This is achieved by replacing executives and directors and implementing specific strategies that allow the next stage of the organizational life cycle to unfold.

Stacey's interpretation of the implications of complexity science for this dominant management discourse leads him to question the assumptions that stability is desirable and that an organization can be viewed as if it has a life of its own. He offers a perspective that puts a spotlight on routine micro interactions between people in an organization as the generator of population wide patterns.

Moving from systems thinking to process thinking...has a number of important consequences. Strategy ceases to be understood as the realization of someone's intended...state for the whole organization...The focus of attention is then not on some abstract systemic whole but on what people are actually doing in their relationships with each other. It is in interaction...that members of organizations perpetually construct their future as continuity and potential transformation at the same time.

(Stacey, 2007, 240)

Stacey and collaborator Shaw believe far-from-equilibrium conditions exist in human interactions during creative, free-flowing conversation (Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2003b). It is this dynamic which provides the capacity for a group of people to innovate, create, and cope with the exigencies of organizational life. Streatfield describes such conversations as exhibiting

the dynamic analogous to the “edge of chaos”, where patterning themes have a paradoxical characteristic of continuity and spontaneity at the same time...The felt qualities of such conversations are liveliness, fluidity, and energy but also a feeling of grasping at meaning and coherence.

(Streatfield, 2001, p. 89)

The aim of this paper is to contribute new insights to the management field by examining the experience of leaders of one small voluntary organization attempting to move beyond start-up in light of the widely accepted life cycle literature and the alternative body of literature described above.

### *Back to Plek*

Soon after the March meeting, members of the nominating committee of the board created a plan to converse with all trustees about their ability to fulfill the new expectations for the “active” board, which included four face-to-face meetings each year. As a result of these conversations three trustees stepped aside. This triggered a search for several new trustees and a decision to seek people who would bring greater diversity to the board and connections with new sectors. While the nominating committee work was underway, I initiated a search for an experienced healthcare leader.

Shortly after the board meeting, several trustees volunteered to take the lead or become active in several Plek undertakings. A schedule for quarterly meetings was set. Based on the experience at the March meeting, we decided to hold future meetings in the homes of members. Such comfortable, informal settings should foster relationships among trustees and relaxed, spontaneous conversation. Two trustees, Elizabeth Gardener and Nancy Carroll, a new member, stepped forward to help plan the next meeting and Elizabeth offered to host the gathering in her home. In the past it would have been my sole

responsibility as president to prepare the agenda, sometimes in consultation with the chair or vice chair of the board.

As we approached this meeting, held in November 2005, I felt quite optimistic. Attendance was going to be high, several trustees had begun playing the “active” role, an accomplished healthcare executive, Jackie Miller, had just joined the staff as senior vice president, and several development efforts in Plek seemed poised to blossom. I also felt some anxiety. We were in the midst of establishing some new ways of working together, both in the board and among the staff. How would all this work out? Would I be able to help make the most of these new openings, to help manage what was a major transition for Plek Institute? How would my role change?

### *The Meeting Starts*

We were sitting in Elizabeth’s living room, in kind of a circle, perched on sofas and a variety of chairs around an elongated artistically made coffee table.

A round of stories began the meeting. There was a comfortable, relaxed feel in the room.

- Jackie commented on the power of the large painting, which hung in Carol’s dining room, of a homeless man surrounded by bright colors of life.
- Bob told a story about an Open Space meeting he facilitated on behalf of Plek with the entire staff of the Venezuelan division of Merck and the great meaning it had for the participants. In spite of a recent downsizing many commented on the value of the conversations and the fact that they were really being listened to.
- I stated how good I felt watching the physician facilitator of the positive deviance project at Waterbury Hospital, Tony Cusano, grow as a leader and become so engaged in improving the care of patients. Carol added how real and alive he seemed at the positive deviance workshop just held in Toronto.

The pattern of moving from one story to the next changed here with the commentary by Carol and then Bob. It became more conversation-like and also began to organize around a theme – the work of Plek and its impact.

In light of the discussion about building relationships with new people, Elizabeth mentioned her experience leading a “complexity bus tour to Mayo Clinic” at the Organizational Development Network Annual Meeting, and the unexpected participation by the CEO and members of the Mayo Clinic staff interested in complexity. Nancy said one of her friends called to tell her the Mayo trip “was fabulous, the one cool, new thing at the meeting.” Margarita said, “I am listening to this and noticing what makes us feel alive – and it is there is something we can DO. This is more than talk with your friends.” This new theme of action articulated by Margarita moved the conversation further in this direction, a direction of action, of doing, and of connecting people around important issues.

After adjourning for some lunch, the meeting reconvened and attention turned to a discussion about expanding the impact of Plek. This conversation began in three small groups. After gathering again in a full group and hearing from each group, a conversation about the findings ensued. Among the points made were:

- The value of Plek to us is in the conversations.
- We recognize the tension between those interested in theory and those more interested in action.
- Bob noted that he had a bias: “In order to make progress we need the ability to have an ongoing subject of conversation.”

The next section of the meeting also involved small and large group conversations and was devoted to a review of experiences with Plek conferences, an articulation of hopes and goals for these events, and development of a conference strategy. As the small groups were formed, members were encouraged by Elizabeth to use a q-storming process (ask as many questions as you can to kick off the conversations). Some highlights of the conversations were:

- What needs to “go around” conferences to harvest the opportunities that are generated during a conference? We generally do insufficient follow-up.
- What is the best mix of process, content, and star power?
- What can we learn from what has worked well so far?

This is but a small subset of the ideas and observations shared. During this portion of the meeting I was feeling quite anxious, probably because I felt embarrassed I had not thought of or used quite a number of the ideas brought up in the conversation. I was wondering how I could ever live up to all these expectations. How in the world could the plethora of good ideas be enacted by our very small staff?

After reflecting later in the evening on the commitment, ideas and energy exhibited by the board members during the meeting, I began to wonder about the adequacy of my ways of leading Plek. Was there a different set of practices that would be more effective in tapping the talent of these dedicated people? What ideas might these insightful trustees have for me? Perhaps, I thought, I should find some way to express these questions during the meeting tomorrow. In itself, this would be different pattern for me.

### *Morning Reflections*

After everyone settled in on Saturday morning in the living room, Elizabeth invited reflections on yesterday's conversation. Here is some of what people had to say:

- Elizabeth – “The energy and interest exhibited by members pleased me.”
- Bob – “Friday's conversations didn't feel finished.”
- John – “We raised lots of ideas about conferences yesterday but did not bring the conversation to a conclusion.”

At this point I shared a reflection. I noted the mixed emotions I felt. I was thrilled with the move to a more active board and with the new board and staff members. I was excited by growing interest in some of the new projects underway. At the same time I was questioning why we were not further along given all the fine people associated with Plek. Was there another pattern of leading I could embrace that would stimulate more rapid development I mused?

These comments shifted the morning's dynamics from a go-around-the-circle-and-share-a-comment to an exploration of this theme. One trustee noted, “Let's be realistic; we will always have big dreams so we will always have a distance to travel. Look around at the

great people you have surrounded yourself with.” One of the new trustees, Bill, observed, “Plek is very young, it took Sigma Theta Tau twenty years to build a significant organization and figure out the roles of board and staff.” Elizabeth added, “I am seeing that we are making the transition we put in motion at the last meeting – to a sleeves rolled up board.” From Carol, “We have come far this year; engaged new staff and trustees, a number of new practical applications underway. Our work will never be done; there will be periods of great jumps and times when we’re slogging through the swamp.” Nancy, another new board member dramatically illustrated the point that came to me the previous day. She said, “When I got in my car last night I was thinking, what melody did I hear yesterday? It went something like this – do do dododo be do do do dododo be. There are lots of creative people in this group and loads of ideas. I felt a tension about what got done, could have been done better, a sense of disappointment.” Bob observed, “My belief is that the disconnect was due to a lack of staff.”

After the session was over, Margarita walked over, leaned down and said, “You are doing a fabulous job, look at the people you have attracted around you.”

### *Avoidance*

While writing about this conversation, I noticed that no one directly addressed my question and that I raised my question about leadership in a way that displayed vulnerability. The response it generated was a mixture of deflection (“let’s be realistic” and “lack of staff”) and reassurance (“you are doing a fabulous job”) aimed at relieving my anxiety and mixed feelings. While reflecting on this overall experience, it also struck me how much of the meeting conversation was superficial and that no significant differences were expressed. There was no critical inquiry.

Another reflection that seemed important was how much of this narrative is about individuals, especially me. I make numerous references to my feelings before and during the November meeting, and wonder about my ways of leading and ability to see Plek through the changes it was navigating. I puzzle about this intense individual orientation I bring to this narrative. It reminds me of the focus the life cycle literature shines on the founder and CEO. Elias’ directed his intellect to this orientation and labeled it *Homo*

*clausus* for people who feel they exist within themselves in a kind of closed box (Elias, 1970; Elias, 1998). He saw this orientation as a consequence of societal development.

There is today a widespread modeling of the self-image which induces the individual to feel and think as follows: “I am here, entirely on my own; all the others are out there, outside me; and each of them goes his own way, just like me, with an inner self which is true self, his pure ‘I’, and an outward costume, his relationship to other people.” This attitude toward themselves and others appears to those who have adopted it as entirely natural and obvious...It is this conflict within the individual...their association with socially instilled fear in the form of shame and embarrassment...which causes the individual to feel that “inside” himself he is something that exists quite alone...The gulf and the intense conflict which the highly individualized people of our stage of civilization feel within themselves are projected by their consciousness into the world.

(Elias, 1991, pp. 27-28)

The pattern of interaction, appreciative and conflict-free, has me starting to wonder how it developed and how it is sustained. What role did I play in engendering this value of conflict avoidance? I know I sought to create an atmosphere in Plek that was welcoming of people and a broad variety of complexity science perspectives. I encouraged people to develop relationships with Plek and with colleagues in Plek, and attempted to create an atmosphere where people felt appreciated. Such an orientation seemed necessary. After all, Plek was a new organization that began with no capital and was dependent upon the volunteer efforts of founding trustees, some early members and me. I worked unpaid for a year to help establish the Institute, secure the required regulatory and legal approvals, attract trustees, and craft the early plans.

This orientation – a consequence of the Institute’s early circumstances, the habits I brought to the work of the Plek, and interactions with several trustees active in the early days of the organization – was appreciated and *reinforced* by numerous trustees and “seen” as representing the values of the organization. Here are several written representative comments submitted by trustees for inclusion in my performance evaluation conducted earlier in the year.



- “Curt is fabulous at conveying his sense of appreciation for the contributions people make. Given our reliance on volunteers and voluntary contributions this is a critical skill and Curt is one of the best I’ve ever encountered (and a big reason why I’m willing to continue to contribute and participate).”
- “Curt communicates the values of the organization well.”

What were “*unseen*” were some unintended, negative consequences of this pattern: Plek was not an organization where ideas were vigorously contested, where deep differences were explored, where conflict was accepted. A hint of this came in a statement Bob shared with me a year or so ago when he observed how difficult he found it to voice criticisms of me: “You have a wall of kindness around you.” This wall, I note, he helped maintain.

### *“Let’s Be Positive”*

So, Plek board members and I were faced with several challenges in creating a more effective organization: membership by three new trustees, engagement of a senior executive, and an effort to put in place new board practices designed to increase interaction and take advantage of a more diverse set of skills and experiences. In undertaking this work we were confronting a critical and generally unseen challenge: an existing pattern of interacting – which could be characterized as well-meaning, polite and appreciative – which made it difficult for the *diversity* in the board to find expression. The value of such diversity was emphasized by Zahra in writing about the success of entrepreneurial threshold firms. The capacity for learning is “influenced by exposure to diverse, external knowledge sources. The board of directors can play an important role in prompting the firm to seek diverse knowledge and expand its absorptive capacity” (Zahra & Filatotchev, 2004, p. 889).

I began to believe this pattern had become the norm, and hence a hindrance to the Institute’s ability to adapt and innovate. While the specific pattern here may be somewhat unique, the general issue of dealing with an entrenched, repetitive pattern formed by a limited number of people involved in creating an organization must be common. This certainly seems to be the point when Gedajlovic wrote about “legacies...embedded in the firm’s...processes, values...” (Gedajlovic, Lubatkin, & Schulze, 2004, p. 900), when

Lynall commented on the “institutionalization” of “initial patterns of activity” (Lynall, Golden, & Hillman, 2003, p. 424), and when Romanelli warned of the “continuation of established patterns” (Romanelli & Tushman, 1994, p. 1142).

If one turned to the conventional life cycle management literature to make sense of this pattern and for advice on how to deal with it, what would one find? As seen in the earlier review of the literature, a common observation would be that patterns which led to success in one stage of organizational life become a limiting remnant in the subsequent stage (Boeker & Wiltbank, 2005; Churchill & Lewis, 1983; Gedajlovic, Lubatkin, & Schulze, 2004; Lynall, Golden, & Hillman, 2003). Authors frequently cite the difficulties involved in changing these patterns because of path dependency (Gedajlovic, Lubatkin, & Schulze, 2004; Lynall, Golden, & Hillman, 2003). Their most frequent *prescription* for dealing with patterns that are no longer relevant patterns is to change them or craft a plan to change them.

The second prescription is to replace the founder and trustees or supplement them with people with the required skills (Boeker & Wiltbank, 2005; Churchill & Lewis, 1983; Greiner, 1972; Lynall, Golden, & Hillman, 2003; Zahra & Filatotchev, 2004). While admittedly, a number of these recommendations may make perfect sense (i.e., to grow an organization one may need more staff, to use them effectively one must delegate, this literature is *glaringly devoid* of insight into *how* these patterns, these artifacts are developed, sustained and changed. One would assume from the life cycle literature that they are, as noted earlier, legacies of rational decisions by senior leaders (Stacey’s “autonomous individuals”) or a natural consequence of an organization (Elias’ “supra-individual organic entity”) at a certain stage in its life cycle.

This is *not* the case with Plek Institute. From the story told so far, it was clear to me that the overall pattern of appreciation and conflict avoidance was neither the product of a few rational senior leaders nor the organization itself, but rather an unexpected consequence of routine conversations – Stacey’s micro-interactions. We witnessed a self-organizing process that reproduced patterns of relating, a pattern that Elias would note stemmed from the intentions of people yet yielded a pattern no one intended or planned (Elias, 1991).

Nolan, in writing about stability in a consulting organization, argued

...stuckness is an active, unintended, emergent pattern whereby power relations between practitioners and the interlocking of their identities constrain the inquiry into practice which might lead to its transformation.

(Nolan, 2005, p. 81)

As I thought about the pattern displayed during the last board meeting and over the course of the Institute's development, I began to sense its repetitive rhythm. Complexity science would suggest such orderly, predictable and stable patterns restrict change because they do not display the far-from-equilibrium dynamics discussed earlier. Ary Goldberger, a prominent physician researcher points out that physiologic systems characterized by "highly periodic dynamics" are a "defining feature of pathology". Such systems are "less adaptable and less able to cope with a constantly unpredictably changing environment" (Goldberger, 1997, p. 547). Similarly, Stacey and Griffin observe that patterns of relating with a periodic rhythm are "inappropriate for dealing with the fluidity of ordinary, everyday life..." (Stacey & Griffin, 2005, p. 7).

I sense that more can be learned from further explorations of the alternative literature since it seems relevant to what was going on in Plek. I will examine what this literature can contribute to an understanding of what creates and sustains these stuck patterns. But first, let us continue the narrative by moving to the next board meeting.

### *Planning for the Next Gathering*

I asked John and Carol if they would be willing to work with me to plan the upcoming meeting. Involving different trustees in design of meetings was intriguing to me as I felt it would bring additional variety to the planning. Both Carol and John agreed to help out with the next meeting, which was to be held in January 2006. In our first conference call we spoke about the preceding meeting, some potential topics, and a desire to approach the meeting in a more conversational manner. Our sense was that the November meeting was a bit over-engineered, meaning times were set for each topic and specific interaction processes were suggested for some of the topical discussions. I mentioned some potential items for the agenda, including reflections on board member interactions. I also told them about the writing I was doing for the DMan program on the transition Plek was in and that I wanted to share with them an early draft of a paper I was writing since it dealt with

board dynamics. Between calls I sent out the draft of my paper along with comments received from my faculty supervisor, Ralph Stacey. In our next call we talked about where best to place the discussion about patterns of board interaction. John suggested that it go first because we would reach everyone when they were fresh and insights from the conversation could inform the balance of the meeting.

While we were in the midst of these discussions an email showed up from John.

Curt

I have read your paper through a couple of times, as well as Ralph's comments.

I wonder also about the lack of apparent conflict – what have you observed about who talks and who doesn't, about who people talk with and don't talk with.

So I'll say something about myself – I am put off by a few members and find myself avoiding any meaningful conversation with them – I, as a theory interested guy, am distressed often by how easily favorite ideas are labeled complexity and become a focus of attention and action – I am increasingly finding it a chore to make myself come to board meetings with all the "let's be positive" flavor we seem to adopt, rather than critical thinking/discussion about our work – and yes, I have been reluctant to voice these feelings – perhaps because some may be more personal than I would feel OK about saying in a group and some because I recognize the importance of very different perspectives being offered, even if the way in which they are is not comfortable for me. So if the paper stimulated that from me, if we are open with one another, it could be an interesting meeting.

see you Friday

John

John was one of the founding trustees of Plek and one of the most active and conscientious trustees. If he was holding back because of the “let's be positive” pattern, this pattern must be very strong and pervasive. Elias' observation comes to mind.

The basic tissue resulting from many single plans and actions of man can give rise to change and patterns that no individual person has planned or created. From the interdependence of people arises an order *sui generis*, an order more compelling and stronger than the will and reason of the individual people composing it.

(Elias, 1998, p. 150)

I recall too that Bob had privately expressed to me some irritation with Margarita's habit of commenting on everything during board discussions. During one of our preparatory phone calls, Carol wondered how she would deal with Betty during the meeting. Carol said she found Betty's participation in meetings disruptive since she participated so infrequently her observations were uninformed.

With these publicly unexpressed thoughts of trustees in mind, it seemed to me that our plan for discussing our patterns of interactions at the Board meeting made sense. As I thought about my participation in the upcoming meeting, the notion of diversity ran through my mind, since diversity is known to be a key to change. Allen claims that innovation, change, creativity, and adaptability depend on diversity, on "non-average" individuals and their actions (Allen, 1998, p. 36). Entering the meeting I intended to play a different, more active role and lay out fully my understanding of the patterns of interaction that had developed. My hope was to stimulate an exploration of this pattern, introduce a new theme into our discussions, and hopefully take a step towards more free-flowing, far-from-equilibrium conversational patterns.

### *Reflecting on Our Patterns of Working and Governing Together*

With everyone seated in a circle in the Plek offices, an old mill, Carol opened the January board meeting and spoke about the value of considering how we *are* together, how we interact and work together, and how to think about this in the context of complexity concepts. She noted that I had done some writing about this in conjunction with my doctoral studies and asked me to begin the discussion by sharing some observations. (John and Bob were not present. John encountered weather troubles which stranded him en route and Bob had a previous commitment.)

I began by saying I too felt it was important for us to jointly examine how we are together (in addition to the usual focus on what we are doing). I noted this type of conversation was not a usual occurrence in organizations and boards. I noted too that given the decision reached at the early 2005 board meeting to take some risks to make more rapid progress on the mission of Plek, it felt like this type of reflection was especially important. I told them I wanted to share my reflections as a way of getting the explorations underway and that I looked forward to their perspectives and the fuller picture of Plek which would result.

In my remarks, I shared my understanding of the patterns of interaction that had developed in Plek and how these patterns emerged. I spoke of the dependence in Plek on a few key people, the decision to broaden participation by bringing on new staff and increasing involvement by board members, and the appreciative-conflict avoidance orientation. I added my viewpoint that to progress and take full advantage of the skills and experiences of all trustees we had to find ways to work with difference. The conventional management literature, I observed, offered little of value about the process of changing patterns developed in the early years of organizational life. I spoke for about fifteen minutes.

This was a different way of beginning a board meeting. Typically I would not play such a strong role. It was clearly a calculated attempt devised by Carol, John and me to introduce a new subject into the board conversation. Goffman refers to this as “influencing the definition of the situation” (Goffman, 1959, pp. 3-4). I also recognized that where this move would take us and its very meaning were unpredictable and would be determined by how others responded. In line with Mead’s notion of gesture and response (Mead, 1934), Goffman writes:

When we allow that the individual projects a definition of the situation when he appears before others, we must also see that the others, however passive their role may seem to be, will themselves effectively project a definition of the situation by virtue of any lines of action they initiate to him.

(Goffman, 1959, p. 9)

What follows below are excerpts from the discussion my remarks triggered, selected to illuminate the pattern which developed.

Margarita was the first to chime in. “Don’t let go of appreciation, it’s essential for an organization like this. And, it’s only natural for the early folks to dominate. Having more active board members is a good step and will help with this.” Elizabeth added, “I’ve felt the pattern you described, but see it changing.” She then spoke about the “tyranny of alternativeness”, that we don’t want anything to do with traditional management. “This is changing too,” she noted. Carol asked why Elizabeth thought this has changed. “Because we talked about it,” she responded.

Margarita added that she had no idea why Curt asked her to play a leadership role on the Complexity and Nursing Learning Network, but that she felt appreciated and honored and figured that as the president I probably knew best what was needed. Elizabeth added, “Remember, in the early days there were not many on the bench. How could you say no?” Jennifer joined the conversation by stating that she didn’t see people holding back or avoiding difference. She continued, noting that we needed to start “asking hard questions before we begin an initiative and allow space for reflection at a deeper level. I am not sure we devote enough time and space. It’s not that we are afraid to raise issues and concerns.”

My attempts to initiate an exploration of the pattern itself were deflected: “it’s only natural”; “didn’t see people holding back or avoiding difference.” From the November meeting I remember: “we have come far”; “look at the people you have surrounded yourself with.” Stacey refers to practices that deflect open, free-flowing conversation as “rhetorical ploys” and observes they are common and many times employed unconsciously (Stacey, 2003b, p. 381).

Elizabeth observed that we had shifted board dynamics. “I feel now if there isn’t progress on something I care about, I feel I can raise it, I can take it on. I think if something is missing, what *can* I do about it? This is a shift for me.” I then recounted a story which led to a shift in my thinking. It was about the performance evaluation Carol, Bob and John conducted with me earlier in the year. I observed that, with the shared understandings which stemmed from this effort, I felt that there were now three other people whom I

could go to for help on tough issues. I felt the *burden* of the organization weighed less heavily on my shoulders.

Carol added that she shared this experience with me...and noted “that, like Curt did in opening this conversation today, people took some risks in the performance evaluation, which was a shift, even though they couldn’t know what this would mean. This risk resulted in more trust.”

I attempted to move the conversation back to the matter of conflict avoidance and said I wanted to question Jennifer’s conclusion that no one is uncomfortable bringing up differences. I began recounting the email from John about his reluctance to voice his feelings. I observed that here was one of our founding trustees saying he was finding it difficult to.... Here Carol interrupted me and said, “Since John is not here I am not feeling comfortable with you sharing.”

The conversation then moved to how to deal with difference. Kevin and Elizabeth recalled an online conversation several years ago between Ralph Stacey and George Eastman about simple rules and how these two people belittled each other. Jennifer asked how we can bring forth differences and move towards the pain. This is “where leadership can help.” Margarita bemoaned the overly aggressive behavior in public, political dialog. Elizabeth noted that “When I said I don’t care about academic hooaha, fights about definitions and clarity about complexity and I was just about to dismiss their thoughts, I realized here was opportunity for alternative ways of thinking. So we need to avoid not going there.” Carol asked, “Who was watching the online space? This conversation was happening on our territory. There was no Plek intervention saying, this is becoming uncomfortable.” Elizabeth pondered, “How could we host an inquiring, thoughtful discussion about what is complexity? And how does a community participate in such an inquiry, while upholding norms of behavior?” Jackie added that there are some skills to use to engage people around difference. Do we need to get George and Ralph to hear each other?”

Jennifer asked, “Why don’t we have a conference where scholars with very different views are invited to explore.....?” Kevin said he has heard from those attending Plek conferences that the “excitement is around the difference.”



Kevin then took the conversation back to my original question about avoidance of difference and conflict. Margarita said, “I’ve never noticed Elizabeth, Carol or Jennifer holding back.” Carol concluded by observing, “That from what I heard personally today, we went deeper, there is more listening going on, and there is more trust.”

“All of this is a leadership responsibility,” noted Jennifer, “and now we have more, it’s shared by more people.”

The conversation came to a natural closure. Everyone had been engaged and attentive throughout. It was time for lunch, almost two hours after we began.

The afternoon session was devoted to exploring how Plek could branch out beyond healthcare into new sectors and receiving short updates on Plek activities.

### *Morning Reflections*

The next morning Carol shared some observations about the previous day’s conversation, noting that we had spent time exploring how we want to be together as a board based on Curt’s reflections and observation that “appreciation sometimes is in the way.” She highlighted some of the ideas developed during the day.

- We will strive for an active board, with everyone engaged.
- We will also reflect regularly on how we are doing.
- We will strive to constantly learn and grow and resist coming to final conclusions and resolutions.

Jennifer concurred, noting that the increasing time we were devoting to reflection on what we are doing, how we are doing, and what complexity means is a good direction.

Linda, who was not able to attend the Friday session, observed. “It sounds like we’re being more purposeful, more mature.” Elizabeth affirmed this and added that we are also starting to notice patterns.

Margarita then stated, “I don’t know who we are in the complexity field. Are there others like us? How does Plek make its face out there, market itself?” Elizabeth noted this would be the responsibility of folks working on entry into new domains. Margarita snapped back, “If we don’t market broadly, this will mean we’ll continue to grow slowly.” “Now wait a minute,” Jennifer exclaimed, “this is an either/or conversation.”

Betty asked, “What makes us different? I thought we would be more experimental.” While saying this she admitted she was “in the gap”, meaning that she was out of touch as a trustee. Elizabeth countered, saying, “In fact, we are doing this. You should see what’s happened over the last year.” Carol interjected, “As the person running this meeting, I suggest it is time to move on, to finish up our work on membership.”

“I am *chomping* on the bit to get on to membership!” exclaimed Elizabeth.

“It’s time to let Elizabeth talk before her hair falls out,” said Margarita. “I am gonna go insane if I don’t get a chance to talk, because I am so excited about our membership plans.” Elizabeth explained that our previous membership efforts lacked clarity and led to very low levels of membership. Two basic approaches were explored by Carol, Jackie, and Elizabeth. One option was to add more benefits and treat the offering from a traditional membership orientation. The other was to shift to more of a partner orientation, to appeal to people who want to get actively engaged in the work of the Institute. The work group recommended that we move to the partner orientation.

There was lots of engagement in the conversation, quick, spontaneous back and forth, lots of mixing, animation. Some people were questioning some aspects of the proposal, notably the recommendation to limit access to some Plek publications and online material to members. “Why restrict, why not be generous?” asked Linda.

Carol, “It feels like there is some disagreement here.”

“I *have* to ask about our purpose. Is it about social transformation?” asked Betty.

Carol replied, “This is an important question and related to the matter of communication. Is our mission statement good enough for now?” Jennifer noted that she felt there was general alignment around our purpose, though we could always use some better language.

There was lots of cross talk and side conversations going on.

Carol asked, “Can I get people to listen, please?”

Elizabeth proceeded, “Jackie and I will be the shepherds of the membership process. What we’re looking for now is a general OK and everybody’s help in attracting members. We’re aiming for 1000 members.”

I sensed the conversation had gone long enough and that the membership plans were far enough along for approval. I suggested we call the question and go with the plan outlined by Elizabeth and elaborated during the discussion. With this request, the membership plan was unanimously approved.

### *Carol Invited Closing Reflections*

As lunch time approached and the end of the meeting neared, Carol invited reflections on the experience of being together. Here is a representative sample.

Margarita – “It was a slice!”

Elizabeth – “There is growing momentum from touching base and sharing our work at these new quarterly meetings. We’re making an important shift.”

Jennifer – “A really good board meeting. I like the looseness. We’re learning to work with our gifts. Carol moving us along. Elizabeth helping me get ready. We’re figuring out how to support one another.”

Linda – “It’s hard to get things done on the phone. I am seeing the synergy from being together in front of us. This is an incubator for me. I am getting new ideas for my work.”

Betty – “I came wondering if I would remain on the board. I guess I’ll stay.”

Margarita – “Curt, it took some guts to start the meeting as you did. You are a testament to complexity ways of leading. You’re our man, one of the best leaders I’ve ever seen.”

Linda – “Curt, you’re not good at accepting compliments. Just sit and bask in it.”

Carol – “I tried to keep a light facilitating touch. It seemed like we switched gears smoothly and that it was not onerous. I’ve learned something from our reflections about how we are together and the importance of taking time to reflect. I also saw that some risks were taken and they seemed to deepen our conversations and lead to some more open sharing. I did *miss* cooking together. And lastly, I personally think we pulled together lots of threads. Jennifer’s knitting was a fitting metaphor of our meeting.”

### *My Sense of What Was Going On*

As we closed, our conversation returned to the dominant appreciative pattern, yet words like shift, risk, looseness showed up. As I looked back over the whole course of the whole meeting, I saw a few glimmers of differences being expressed. These did not occur in a direct exploration of my request for examination of the appreciative, no-conflict pattern, but in the working conversations about other issues. Some differing opinions on the membership proposal were called out by Carol. A modified plan was the outcome. Several trustees saw the Stacey-Eastman online debate as suggesting an opportunity for conferences where different scholarly views are contested, albeit within bounds of civility. Betty stated emphatically, “I *have* to ask about our purpose”, interjecting a new theme into the deliberations about membership. Compared to the November meeting, the conversations in January seemed livelier, more spontaneous. They contained more feeling, more emotion, stronger language, and more disclosure. “I am gonna go insane if I don’t get a chance to talk,” said Elizabeth. “I came wondering if I would remain on the board,” from Betty. I was also struck by the fact that for the first time we had a conversation about how we interacted and worked together.

My strongest impression, however, is about the power and resilience of the appreciative-no conflict pattern. Collectively and, I believe, unconsciously, we actively worked to

sustain the stuck pattern I exposed and was seeking to free up. Ironically, and with sheepish admission, some of my planned actions, spontaneous interventions, and openings I did not pursue, along with the habitual responses they elicited, resulted in further repetition of the appreciative-conflict avoidance pattern. For instance, as I had done in the November meeting I displayed some personal vulnerability by mentioning the “burden of the organization”. Such a move invited consolation and more appreciation, not consideration of different ways of working in Plek. I allowed my attempt to demonstrate that there were some differences on the Board by referring to John’s email to be derailed, thus avoiding a conflict in the moment with Carol, the meeting facilitator. Shaw captured this overall experience when she comments about a discourse

which comes to police the way the practice is contested. Within the rationale of an accepted systematic discourse aspects of our experience become rationally invisible to us, the discourse itself does not afford us opportunities to draw attention in certain ways and a certain voice is unable to speak. This sense of being constrained in a prison one is helping to sustain can affect us all.

(Shaw, 2002, p. 96)

Nolan suggests that any discussion about such habitual interactions is avoided because we become aware that our identities are being challenged, that our “fragile stability” is under threat (Nolan, 2005, p. 95). Like his story about practice in his consulting firm,

...the maintenance of relationships is put over and above the exploration of differences of opinion. Holding our relationships and identities intact prevents us from facing a difference generated by inquiry into our taken-for-granted practice.

(Nolan, 2005, p. 95)

While I can appreciate the general relevance of such a view, it seems especially pertinent to an organization like Plek which depends on volunteer trustees.

To make further sense of the drive to sustain pattern, I will turn again to the alternative literature of Stacey and Elias. Both of these scholars emphasize power as a central feature of relationships whenever people depend upon each other, when there is interdependence. Elias writes, “Power is not an amulet possessed by one person and not another; it is a

structural characteristic of human relationships – of *all* human relationships (Elias, 1970, p. 74). Hence, when questions are raised about the established pattern of appreciation-conflict avoidance in Plek, they threaten existing power relations. Such power relations are preserved notes Stacey, referring to Elias' and Scotson's work *The Established and the Outsiders*, by the "use of trivial differences to establish different membership categories" or who is included and who is excluded (Stacey, 2003a, p. 124). Any potential shifts in who is in and who is out, argues Stacey, triggers anxiety and efforts to deal with this feeling. Nolan brings this point home by observing that actions which threaten to alter power balances offer "some practitioners more promising horizons but others diminished standing" (Nolan, 2005, p. 102). In the November and January board meetings I can identify multiple examples of this. Deflections or rhetorical ploys deployed in November to my invitation to explore my leadership strategies came in many forms: "Plek is very young"; we have "come far". The January conversation about the appreciation-conflict avoidance pattern elicited: "Don't let go of appreciation"; I've felt the pattern you describe, but see it changing"; "I've never noticed Elizabeth, Carol or Jennifer holding back". I noticed Betty, who has not been an active trustee, make several attempts to be noticed, to contribute, perhaps to be included. Her queries – "What makes us different? I thought we would be more experimental" – were met with several dismissive replies. "You should see what's happened over the last year." "As the person running this meeting, I suggest it's time to move on."

What sustains these power relations, suggests Stacey, are ideologies. As individuals make choices in how to respond in interactions, their choices "always have an ideological basis" (Stacey, 2007, p. 239). In Plek, one could reasonably argue that the established or insiders have an ideology that could be characterized as appreciative, conflict averse, and action-oriented. Members of this group include Elizabeth, Jennifer, Margarita, and Carol. The outsiders embrace an ideology which calls for examination of difference, for reflection, and critical attention to theory. In this group one would find John, Dan, and in some respects Betty. The degree of their outsider status hit me when I received the following email from John.

Subject: Seattle board meeting

Curt,

I am out of the office most of next week, four days the following two weeks and several times in April – I am sorry but I just can't be gone the additional time for the board meeting – I am already feeling left behind on board activities and am thinking seriously if I should give way to someone else who can meet the letter and intent of the new board requirements – I have not come to that conclusion yet, but you should know it is on my mind.

John

Betty had acknowledged publicly at the January meeting that she had considered resigning.

Understanding, working with, even seeing these dynamics of power, ideology, inclusion, and exclusion are extraordinarily challenging since, as Shaw recounted, “aspects of our experience are rationally invisible to us” (Shaw, 2002, p. 96). Nolan sought to understand this invisibility by exploring the scholarship of Shotter, who commented on the socially constructed patterns people create.

As its organization cannot be traced back to the intentions of any particular individuals, it is as if it has a ‘given’, a naturally or ‘externally caused’ nature; though to those within it, is ‘their/our’ situation.

(Shotter, 1993, p. 39)

“Here, Shotter...accounts for the ‘situation’ the ‘way things are’ dynamically and in a way that highlights how the present seems given but is actually co-created in the living present” (Nolan, 2005, p. 101). Stacey adds that ideology “preserves the current order by making that order seem natural” (Stacey, 2003a, p. 125). The conventional management literature on life cycles and small firm growth compounds this invisibility by being totally *silent* on these matters, the processes that sustain and transform ways of working together.

*A Reflective Look Back at the Life Cycle Literature*

With this Plek string of experiences and the alternative literature in mind, I would like to critically examine the key themes from the life cycle literature identified at the beginning of this project.

*Organizations grow in a series of predictable stages, from one relatively stable state to the next.* And, as emphasized in the literature, in between each stable period is a crisis phase. Such an inexorable move from stable state to crisis to stable state is directly *challenged* by findings from complexity science. A key precept of this science is the inherent unpredictability of systems; the future behavior of systems is unknowable because in the interactive, self-organizing processes small changes sometimes trigger novel forms and patterns. This happens when systems are in far-from-equilibrium conditions, when as Stacey notes, “they operate in a paradoxical dynamic of stability and instability *at the same time*” (italics added) (Stacey, 2007, p. 237). So what we have then are *not distinct states or stages but dynamic processes* with coexisting tendencies for surprise and repetition. Where this process will lead is never predictable. This dynamic can be seen in the research of Hanks. He found that many firms do not fit within the accepted life cycle models. Among these firms are those that do not grow, those that fail, and those that go through periods of stagnation or decline, interspersed with periods of growth (Hanks, Watson, Jansen, & Chandler, 1993).

In this short narrative about Plek we can certainly see the play of unpredictability: my planned interventions deflected or leading to unintended places; the coexistence of the appreciation-conflict avoidance pattern with a bit of free-flowing conversation. I wonder what would have happened if a snowstorm had not prevented John from being with us in January.

*Organizations move successfully through these phases if they adopt certain management practices appropriate for the particular stage.* A fundamental belief in the life cycle literature is that organizations behave as if they were alive and, like newborns, are preprogrammed to move from childhood to adolescence and maturity. Driving such life cycle thinking, notes Stacey, is a logic he calls formative causality, that controls the development process (Stacey, 2007). In Plek I experienced nothing approaching organizational preprogramming. To me the development of Plek is much more complex, uncertain, and dynamic. Lowe and Hansen reached this same conclusion:



The multifaceted, dynamic nature of small firms and their interactions with their environments would appear to support an argument that *no single model of growth will ever exist* (italics added) – and all we can do is to try and shed more light on the processes so as to gain a greater understanding of the complex phenomenon of growth.

(Lowe & Henson, 2004, p. 12)

The other belief underlying the above assumption about organizational life cycles is that specific strategies at specific times in the life of an organization will lead to growth and movement to the next stage. Remember the prescriptions, such as replace the founder, change the board composition, and implement systems? As suggested above in the discussion about complexity science and the scholarship of Elias and Stacey, in complex systems or processes there are no simple cause and effect correlations. All one can know is that a change in personnel or systems may have some impact and the impact is not likely to be what was anticipated. We can see from the narrative about Plek that the involvement of new trustees in the work of the board seemed to have no apparent impact on the dominant pattern of interaction. The life cycle literature, and its guidance to bring in new people to change practices, would predict otherwise.

*A heavy focus on individuals, particularly the founder and CEO, in navigating the early stages of growth.* The assumption underpinning this belief is that those occupying positions of power and authority are imbued with the capacity to control the life and direction of an organization. This totally ignores the interdependent nature of life in all human organizations. Because of this interdependency, any action taken by a leader (remember what happened to my attempt to introduce conflict and difference into the conversation?) “becomes interwoven with those of others” and “unleashes further chains of actions the direction and provisional outcome of which depend not on him but the distribution of power and the structure of tensions within the whole mobile human network” (Elias, 1991, p. 49-50). This view also challenges the next life cycle assumption.

*Management and the board are thought of as if they operated independently and little significance is afforded to the work of the board and interactions with management. My*

experiences in Plek suggest it is quite conceivable that, in many small non-profit charitable organizations, such a separation between management and the board is an illusion and ignoring interactions between trustees and executives is an oversight. One could not make sense of the Plek story just told if the board and management were treated as if they operated independently. Such a perception of separation, notes Elias, is a throwback to traditional physical science practices where components of systems were isolated and studied in an effort to understand the system as a whole (Elias, 1998). Clearly the board of Plek plays a key role in the organization, and interactions with management undoubtedly shape the nature and direction of the Institute.

### *Summing Up, Going On*

The life cycle way of thinking has not been of much value to me in making sense of what is going on in Plek or the process and dynamics which affect the performance of this young organization. Likely, this explains why we have not gravitated towards many of the prescriptions offered by this body of literature in our work to move beyond start-up. What have proven to be of much more value are insights from complexity science and the scholarship of Norbert Elias and Ralph Stacey. This scholarship, viewed in light of an intense experience with the board of trustees of Plek over the past year has left me with a growing appreciation for the processes, dynamic patterns, and interdependencies shaping Plek Institute. I have become more aware of the generally unseen and unacknowledged impact of rhetorical ploys, shifting power differentials and constantly recreated patterns, the subtle hand of ideologies, the “work” of inclusion-exclusion dynamics, and the role I played in sustaining patterns I sought to change. I am hoping to quicken my awareness, my ability to notice these dynamics as they are playing out in the moment, and to allow this awareness to inform my participation in the conversational flow of the organization. For me this will entail ongoing efforts to step outside my *Homo clausus* orientation.

The enquiry process chronicled in this paper has me feeling very alive, fascinated, deeply engaged, and stimulated to continue this path of discovery and experience. Whether this continuing inquiry will prove useful to Plek as we move beyond start-up is uncertain. In any case, it is my hope that others involved in quests to help young organizations grow and thrive will find this story, the alternative literature, and the examination of life cycle thinking of value and some aspects of my experience their experience.

*From plans arising, yet unplanned  
By purpose moved, yet purposeless.*

(Elias, 1991, p. 64)

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## **PROJECT FOUR**

### **Values and Volunteers: Exploring the Paradox of Ideology in the Leadership of a Nonprofit Association**

Submitted January 2007

Nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are significant players in modern society, yet scholarship devoted to their unique attributes and issues is limited. This paper answers the call for research on the organizational dynamics particular to this sector by exploring the leadership challenge when volunteers and values intersect. Of special interest will be the generally unseen paradoxical nature of values. The research reported here was conducted by taking seriously my personal experience with these topics in light of management literature on nonprofit organizations and scholarship on ideology (values) of Elias, Joas, Mead and Stacey.

#### *The Beginning of the Story*

In July 2004 Plek cosponsored with Harvard Center for Health Systems Improvement a workshop on complexity science and healthcare quality. The purpose of this gathering was to examine if insights from complexity could contribute new understandings and approaches to advancing the quality of healthcare. A longstanding member of Plek suggested that Norbert Strong be invited to this gathering to introduce the social change process positive deviance (PD) into the workshop conversations since he had a hunch that PD was an effective strategy for involving hospital staff in efforts to enhance the care of patients.

Positive deviance as a social and behavior change process was created by Norbert and Mary Strong and has been used in the developing world since 1990 to achieve considerable impact on such challenging issues as childhood malnutrition in Vietnam, infant mortality in Pakistan, and female genital cutting in Egypt (Marsh et al., 2004; Pascale & Sternin, 2005). It is based on the observation that in many communities and organizations there are certain groups or individuals, the positive deviants, who have more successful outcomes than most others. The PD process is designed to help those

whose behavior needs to change to achieve these better results to discover the positive deviants in their midst and the specific practices they use. This novel approach to change fosters widespread participation and conversation among those in an organization or community who ordinarily do not interact.

One outcome of the workshop was the decision by a hospital CEO in attendance to acquaint his hospital colleagues with PD. These explorations led to a decision to employ PD on the issue of medication reconciliation, meaning the proper use of prescription medications by patients following hospitalization. Over an eight month period this process generated a sixty-five percent improvement in medication reconciliation. This was the first known use of PD by a U.S. hospital.

While this project was underway, I began introducing the PD concept to a senior program officer I knew at The James Healthcare Foundation who was interested in complexity science. Rose Marie Monaghan seemed intrigued by this new approach to tough quality problems. Simultaneously, Bob Graber, who chairs the board of trustees of Plek, Kevin James, a consultant and active member of Plek, and I decided it would make sense to provide information on PD to a wider Plek audience, develop a working relationship with Norbert Strong and see what emerged. One result of this decision was to offer a couple workshops on positive deviance. This first of these was held in July 2005. Staff from Waterbury Hospital attended to tell of their experience on medication reconciliation. A number of other healthcare quality improvement professionals attended, including James Lindstrom and Lucinda Forbert. James was a physician who was working on MRSA prevention at the HCA Cleveland Hospital (HCACH) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Lucinda, also a physician, was chief quality officer of a healthcare quality improvement organization in the mid-Atlantic region of the country.

On the second day of the workshop, when participants were given the opportunity to form small groups to explore issues of mutual concern, six or seven people gathered to talk about the potential for addressing MRSA (Methicillin resistant *Stapholoccus aureus*) through PD. I joined this conversation. I had never heard of MRSA. Methicillin resistant *Stapholoccus aureus* (MRSA) is a bacterium that has evolved to become resistant to many antibiotics. It is especially virulent, is transmitted primarily in healthcare facilities,

causes tens of thousands of infections in hospitals and thousands of deaths in the U.S., and is continuing to evolve into even more deadly strains.

Those in the group spoke of the toll MRSA was taking on hospital patients and how it had proven intractable to conventional quality improvement methods. I left impressed with the seriousness of this issue and the desire of this handful of people to experiment with a new approach to preventing MRSA transmissions. I also left with a sense that there was a network under formation that could foster real progress and that achievements like those at Waterbury were conceivable.

This was all taking place in tandem with conversations among Plek board members about the future orientation of the work of the Institute. These explorations led to a decision to engage in some specific action projects and become more than an organization that primarily educated people about complexity science. We saw this shift as a means to learn through doing, to help spur progress on some tough problems, and to attract more interest and support for Plek.

Plek is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization incorporated in the United States. It is governed by a board of trustees comprised of thirteen individuals who serve without compensation, volunteering their time because they believe in the mission of the Institute. Plek began operating in late 2001 and was officially incorporated when eleven people, including me, came together to form the Institute. The Institute is small. It employs four full-time staff and has an annual operating budget of \$750,000. While the Institute has earned small operating surpluses each year and built up equity of \$400,000 since its inception, it is fair to say that its financial state is precarious. It has been a struggle to earn these small profits and they are possible because many people volunteer time to the work of Plek, make donations, and staff salaries are below market rates.

The work of the Institute is heavily dependent on the work and thinking of a small cadre of people, especially the board chair, Bob Graber, and me. I serve as president and am employed on a full-time basis. Bob, who is the retired president of the international division of a pharmaceutical company, gives generously of his time, provides considerable consulting help to organizations on behalf of Plek (for which we earn

income and which Bob provides at no cost to Plek), and makes sizable donations to the Institute every year. He tells people that the two loves of his life are his family and Plek.

### *Resource Dependence – Nonprofit Associations*

The precarious, resource dependent financial situation facing Plek is recognized in the management literature as one factor which distinguishes nonprofit associations from private and government organizations. In a review article on nonprofit management Stone, and colleagues wrote, "...it is generally acknowledged that many nonprofits lack direct control over resource flows and are in an especially resource-dependent position relative to other types of organizations" (Stone, Bigelow, & Crittenden, 1999, p. 388). Knoke, a leader in nonprofit association research and Heimovics echo this view (Heimovics et al., 1993; Knoke & Wood, 1981). Heimovics adds that a principal responsibility of executives in nonprofit associations is to deal with the resource issue.

...nonprofit organizations are particularly vulnerable to external events (e.g. changes in government funding) and are highly dependent on the efforts of top executives to find resources for and to revitalize the missions of their organizations...The principal focus of concern for the executive must be the constantly changing nature of the environment surrounding the organization that either threatens sources of sustenance or creates new opportunities for development.

(Heimovics, Herman, Coughlin, & Jurkiewicz, 1993, p. 419)

For the purposes of this paper I will refer to Plek as a nonprofit association to emphasize the fact the organization is dependent to a significant degree on individuals who have voluntarily come together to support the work of the Institute. Knoke refers to voluntary associations as "formally organized and named groups, most of whose participants do not derive their livelihoods from the organizations' activities, although a few positions may receive pay as staff or leaders" (Knoke & Prenskey, 2006, p. 7). Such associations are members of the nonprofit sector. A leading authority on this sector in the U.S. notes that organizations populating this sector generally share six characteristics:

- *Organizations*, that is, they are institutionalized to some extent...

- *Private*, that is, they are institutionally separate from government...
- *Non-profit-distributing*, that is, they are not dedicated to generating profits for their owners...
- *Self-governing*, that is, they are equipped to control their own activities...
- *Voluntary*, that is, they are non-compulsory and involve some meaningful degree of voluntary participation, either in the actual conduct of the agency's activities or in the management of its affairs. Typically, this takes the form of a voluntary board of directors, but extensive use of volunteer staff is also common.
- Of public benefit, that is, they serve some public purpose and contribute to the public good.

(Salamon, 1999, pp. 10-11)

Bob and I engaged a group of volunteers – including Norbert Strong, Lucinda Forbert, James Lindstrom, and new recruit Jeremy Johnson, the CDC's expert on antibiotic resistant bacteria – to help craft a basic proposal on PD and MRSA we could use to attract foundation interest. We shared early drafts of the proposal with Rose Marie Monaghan from The James Healthcare Foundation. She made a few suggestions for improvement and encouraged us to plow ahead with a full proposal. As our work progressed Rose Marie became more and more enamored with PD and impressed with the group we had pulled together. She, in many respects, became a member of our team, an ally who offered some critical insider's advice. Our formal submission went in October 15, 2005. In December the foundation awarded Plek \$294,000 to support the employment of PD by six beta site hospitals across the country, including HCA Cleveland Hospital (HCACH).

The introduction of PD at HCACH, a two-facility hospital part of the U.S. federal agency, Health Care of America (HCA), came at a time when leaders of the facility were at a crossroad in their efforts to reduce the rate of transmissions of hospital acquired infections, especially MRSA.

The crossroad faced by HCACH clinical leaders was the inability of the hospital, despite three years of effort, to spread the success it had in reducing MRSA transmissions on one nursing unit by 75%, a success attributed to the Toyota Production System (TPS) quality



improvement method, to other units in the hospital. As a result of a PD workshop arranged by James Lindstrom and attended by Chief of Staff, Arnold Lee, MD, it was decided to formally use PD in the facility's MRSA initiative. HCACH leaders found PD attractive because it emphasized solutions from inside the organization, engaged a broad and diverse group of staff in conversations about prevention of MRSA, and acknowledged that preventing MRSA was essentially a social challenge because it depended on staff behavior change of staff. It had already demonstrated on one nursing unit, 4 West, it was possible to drastically reduce MRSA. This fact, that some groups in the same organization were more successful than others, is one of the principal observations underlying the positive deviance methodology.

### *Beliefs, Values and Continued Engagement*

When I examined this narrative about Plek and its approach to MRSA prevention, I identified several values or beliefs that seemed to be guiding the development of the Institute and in particular the beginning MRSA initiative. Important in this examination were the values, beliefs and aspirations that individuals brought to Plek as it was formed. It would be accurate to say the people who incorporated Plek and comprised its first board of trustees shared a view that insights from complexity science could enrich understandings of life in organizations and stimulate advances in management and leadership practices. And more particularly, they and I believed that:

- wide-spread engagement and participation of staff in the essential work of an organization would lead to better performance;
- involving people who bring diverse perspectives and experiences was essential to change;
- new relationships and connections, when nurtured, would stimulate new ways forward and generate new opportunities.

In addition to these beliefs, a pattern of interaction had developed in the Institute, which I characterized in Project Three as “appreciative and conflict-free”. I wrote:

This orientation, a consequence of the Institute's early circumstances, the predilections I brought to the work of the Plek, and interactions with several

trustees active in the early days of the organization, was appreciated and *reinforced* by numerous trustees and “seen” as representing the values of the organization.

One can find evidence of these beliefs in the foregoing narrative. Positive deviance was embraced because it fostered wide engagement of staff, sought out diversity (the positive deviants), and encouraged the formation of new relationships. Plek trustees saw such strategies as consistent with their understanding of what complexity science suggests are characteristics of creative, adaptable organizations. Hence, Plek board members and I actively worked to connect with others not yet part of the Plek community and who came with different backgrounds and experience. From new connections with Norbert Strong, James Lindstrom, Lucinda Forbert, Rose Marie Monaghan, and Arnold Lee emerged the PD MRSA initiative. Efforts were made, like inviting Strong to become a Plek Science Advisor and including Forbert and Lindstrom as principal investigators in the grant-funded PD MRSA Prevention Partnership, to acknowledge the contributions of these new friends of Plek. One, I believe, can also sense from the narrative the abiding belief among key players that our approach to MRSA prevention would make a real difference in hospital infection control practices, thus saving lives and reducing unnecessary suffering. This belief held together those connected with this Plek activity. It is why they gave generously of their time, energy and in some cases, financial resources.

### *Interaction of Volunteers and Values*

It also created a management challenge that may be somewhat unique to the nonprofit and nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector: *leading organizations that are heavily dependent on volunteers and the particular mix of values they hold*. Complicating this challenge in the case of Plek, and many other nonprofit associations as noted earlier, was its insecure financial situation.

When one searches the organizational literature for insights on the nature and management of nonprofit associations and nongovernmental organizations, one is struck by the paucity of serious scholarly writing, despite the growing importance of these organizations in society. Salamon writes,

A striking surge is under way around the globe in organized voluntary activity and the creation of nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations....The scope and scale of this phenomenon are immense. Indeed, we are in the midst of a global “associational revolution” that may prove as significant to the latter twentieth century as the rise of the national state was to the latter nineteenth century. The upshot is a global third sector: a massive array of self-governing private organizations, not dedicated to distributing profits to shareholders or directors, pursuing public purpose outside the formal apparatus of the state. The proliferation of these groups may be permanently altering the relationship between states and citizens...Virtually all of America’s major social movements...have their roots in the nonprofit sector.

(Salamon, 1994, p. 109)

This phenomenon is of relatively recent origin. The roots of nonprofit associations in the United States can be traced back to Benjamin Franklin (1709 – 1790) and a club he formed for “mutual improvement” (Hall, 1992, p. 19). This club, Junto, led to the establishment of a number of voluntary associations such as the first hospital in the United States, public libraries, and an academy. However, such associations did not become a major part of U.S. society until the late twentieth century. Hall noted that until 1940 there were 12,500 secular nonprofit organizations. By 1992 this figure had rocketed to over 700,000 (Hall, 1992).

#### *Limited Scholarship on Nonprofit Associations*

The youth of the nonprofit sector may account for the limited research. The generally unresearched assumption that nonprofit associations are similar in nature to business organizations or government agencies may be another reason. Nutt and Backoff conclude, “Many if not all the procedures for strategic management currently in use were developed in and for private sector firms” (Nutt & Backoff, 1992, p. 23). And Knoke and Prenskey observe that virtually all current models for management and organizational thinking “were developed from and tested on work organizations (firms) or government agencies (bureaus)” (Knoke & Prenskey, 2006).

The nonprofit sector is caught in the middle of an unrelenting contest between competing philosophies and advocates for reform, all of which produce significant motion back and forth across different reform ideologies...The problem is that the nonprofit sector has yet to develop the knowledge base to help individuals choose the reform approach that benefits them most.

(Light, 2000, p. 45)

Perhaps as a result of at these forces – the young age of the sector, the hegemony of the corporate management literature, and the lack of well-developed organizational thinking about nonprofit associations – the clear direction for organizational and management development in the nonprofit sector involves attempts to “professionalize” (Hall, 1992, p. 90), embrace “managerialism” (Young, 1987, p. 436), and become “more businesslike” (Dees, 1998, p. 6). Numerous other scholars point to the same trend (Herman & Renz, 1999; Light, 2000; Young & Salamon, 2002), which Hall observed dates from the 1970s (Hall, 1992).

Despite this strong wave to embrace management and leadership concepts from the business world, a small number of scholars have pointed out that nonprofit associations differ in important ways from for-profit firms and government organizations. One distinction was noted previously – the uncertainty surrounding resource flows and the lack of significant control over such flows. Several authors point to the fact that nonprofit associations are comprised of and dependent upon multiple constituencies and stakeholders whose interests must be acknowledged (Hall, 1990; Salamon, 2003; Stone, Bigelow, & Crittenden, 1999). Dealing with this reality requires special attention to dealing with conflict, balancing interests, and building networks and alliances (Hall, 1990; Knoke & Prenskey, 2006; Salamon, 2003; Young, 1987).

A constituency relatively unique to nonprofit associations is *volunteers*. Brudney observes that,

Managing volunteers is different from managing employees. Volunteers are much less dependent on the organization to which they donate their time than paid staff members...As a result, nonprofit managers...do not have as much control over volunteer workers.

(Brudney, 2005, p. 331)

The noncoercive nature of nonprofits for Frumkin is the most fundamental characteristic which distinguishes the sector from government and business organizations (Frumkin, 2002). Knoke emphasizes that nonprofit organizations are reliant on volunteers for resources of many types, including time, money and effort (Knoke, 1981). Similar views come from the literature on nongovernmental organizations. For example, Edwards notes, “NGDOs (nongovernmental development organizations) cannot rely on hierarchy or coercion, or financial rewards and material incentives as the means to obtain compliance...towards organizational goals” (Edwards & Fowler, 2004b, p. 4). The discretion volunteers command is a point acknowledged by Young (Young, 1987) and one that relates to a body of literature on managing commitment covered later in this project (Kanter, 1968; Knoke, 1986; Knoke, 1981; Knoke & Wood, 1981). Handy writes:

...you [the volunteer] are there because you agree with the goals of the organization and the people who work there, in which case you can't be told what to do but only be *asked*, because if you disagree you are quite entitled to refuse to do it.

(Handy, 1988, p. 32)

Many features of nonprofit associations described here show up in this Plek narrative: the importance and uncertainty of resource flows; multiple constituencies; balancing interests and dealing with conflict; *and managing volunteers*.

One of the major texts on nonprofit management points out a series of additional distinctions: limited control by market mechanisms; lack of clear goals and economic motivations; more public oversight; and limits on authority to act (Nutt & Backoff, 1992). Along with these observations, the authors conclude “that strategic managers of these organizations should be wary of using private sector approaches” (Nutt & Backoff, 1992, p. 23). This caution is echoed by other scholars of nonprofit associations and NGOs.

These challenges require managerial skills of the highest order, tailored specifically to the context and values base of the NGDO world, not borrowing of second-hand advice from business schools or bureaucracies.

(Edwards & Fowler, 2004a, p. 9)

### *Are They Different?*

Heimovics and colleagues state that nonprofits are “clearly hybrids, or more accurately, a third type of organization” and that “management/leadership practices...cannot be adequately derived by extrapolation or inference from research on business or government” (Heimovics, Herman, Coughlin, & Jurkiewicz, 1993, p. 424). Light, in a book titled *Making Nonprofits Work: A Report on the Tides of Nonprofit Management Reform*, frames the debate between “those who want to see nonprofit agencies redesigned to be patterned after best practices in the private sector” and those “who maintain that the two sectors are, to rephrase a famous maxim, fundamentally alike in all unimportant aspects” (Light, 2000, pp. v-vi).

Whatever the reasons for the limited research on nonprofit associations and NGOs, the recognition of this is widespread (Fowler, 2000; Heimovics, Herman, Coughlin, & Jurkiewicz, 1993; Knoke, 1986; Light, 2000; Salamon, 1999). Here is a representative sample of what some leading authorities of nonprofit associations have to say.

- “...association research...remains a fragmented and unfocused enterprise at the margins of its parent disciplines” (Knoke, 1986, p.17).
- “...investment in understanding the leadership of non-profit-making organizations is both grossly deficient and urgently needed” (Fowler, 2000, p. 164).

My review of the literature affirmed these conclusions and led to another. That while little is written of a serious nature about nonprofit associations, less is written about the role of nonprofit leaders, the internal dynamics of nonprofit associations and, most relevant for this paper, *management of volunteers and values*. A survey of some major texts supports this finding (Drucker, 1990; Frumkin, 2002; Hall, 1992; Handy, 1988; Herman, 2005; Hudson, 1999; Middleton, 1987; Nutt & Backoff, 1992; Powell, 1987; Salamon, 1999; Salamon, 2003; Salamon, 1994). Knoke reaches the same conclusion, noting “association researchers have largely neglected internal processes, very little is known about either collective decision-making or its consequences at the individual,

organizational, and system level” (Knoke, 1986, p. 12). When one does come across management insights involving volunteers and values, it is generally simplistic and superficial. For example: Hall notes that conflict around values is to be expected and Drucker encourages nonprofit leaders to exemplify their organization’s values (Drucker, 1990; Hall, 1992). They go little further.

### *The Writing on Volunteers and Values*

There are however, a few management thinkers who have explored the domain of volunteers

and values in some depth. The research and management guidance emerging from their work is about:

- expressing values;
- building networks; and
- fostering interaction and engagement.

Frumkin, in his writing about nonprofit organizations and values, notes that “taking full advantage of the expressive component of nonprofit activity is critical to the success of the sector and its more instrumental and productive roles” (Frumkin, 2002, p. 96). When he writes about the expressive component, he is referring to the opportunity for people to convey and enact their values through volunteer activities on community issues of importance to them. Frumkin examines the nature of leadership in nonprofit organizations and identifies one of the central challenges as finding means to capture the full potential of such expressive urges. “Harnessing and managing the expressive dimension...becomes a strategic necessity” (Frumkin, 2002, p. 103). Jeavons echoes this view in his conclusion that a distinguishing characteristic of nonprofit organizations – their values-expressive nature – creates a “special context for their management” (Jeavons, 2005, p. 403). Mason writes, “One of the most difficult tasks of top management is to decide the content of the organization’s culture, that is, to determine what values should be shared...” (Mason, 1996, p. 105). Together this suggests that managers cannot rely on coercion to motivate volunteers and must rely instead on appealing to the values base of individuals to foster engagement and action (Edwards & Fowler, 2004b). Brudney writes that managers cannot rely on traditional means for controlling behavior, but rather must embrace a

“management-by-partnership” approach in working with volunteers (Brudney, 2005, p. 332).

Withdrawal from a commitment is a concept introduced into the organizational literature by Coleman when he wrote about “yielding control over...resources to a corporate actor” and the option for an individual to withdraw the right to use such resources (Coleman, 1973, p. 3). This concept was further developed by Kanter and Knoke as they explored commitment and detachment in voluntary organizations (Kanter, 1968; Knoke, 1986; Knoke, 1981; Knoke & Wood, 1981). They noted that decisions faced by individuals about participation in organizations have to do with joining, the degree of involvement, and whether or not to stay involved. They also observed there is limited formal, empirical research on these matters.

Knoke, in reporting on his research, cited evidence for the conclusion that an organization’s practices had an impact on member commitment. Specifically, he highlighted communication and high levels of participation in decision-making as having “significant organizational-level effects on commitment and detachment” (Knoke, 1981, p. 154). In further research he found that such involvement enabled organizations to “acquire personal resources for collective use” (Knoke, 1986, p. 12). In studies of nonprofit organizations, Herman and Heimovics found that leaders who practiced “board-centered leadership”, meaning genuine engagement of trustees in the work of the organization and attention to the quality of interactions among trustees, were especially effective (Heimovics, Herman, Coughlin, & Jurkiewicz, 1993; Herman & Heimovics, 2005).

Kanter’s research explored three orientations that affected an individual’s commitment to ongoing participation in a collective (Kanter, 1968). One had to do with cohesion, meaning an individual’s emotional or affective connection with members of a group. Such connections were dependent upon meaningful contact with the group. In a somewhat similar vein, Knoke explored how friendship networks may strengthen support for voluntary associations (Knoke, 1986). Herman, in the above referenced study on effective leadership of nonprofit organizations, also noted the importance of informal networks for the flow of information (Herman & Heimovics, 2005).



In another research study, scholars found that volunteers who were “paid” in symbolic ways – recognition, appreciation, meaningful feedback, supportive social connections, and interest in their well-being – were less likely to withdraw their support and more likely to sustain high levels of participation (Farmer & Fedor, 1999).

Upon reflection, I concluded I generally followed the guidance offered in this body of literature. Expressive values were harnessed by engaging trustees and new partners in the positive deviance MRSA initiative. In fact, conversations among some of them at the first Plek PD workshop were an important trigger for the entire effort. This effort was then pursued through engagement and partnerships with an expanding group of people. There were active communication and regular interactions among the players in planning a way forward. Lucinda Forbert, Norbert Strong, and James Lindstrom were invited to attend Plek board planning discussions about the MRSA project. “Board-centered leadership” can be seen in how Bob was involved. Coercion was not in the mix. Efforts were made to foster relationships and connections among those involved. Contributions were acknowledged; witness Strong’s appointment to the science advisory board of the Institute and James and Lucinda’s inclusion as principal investigators in the PD MRSA Prevention Partnership.

These strategies, which were compatible with the Plek beliefs and values articulated earlier in this paper, *seemed to be paying off*. This is what the above literature would predict. Our group of volunteers was growing and members were willingly giving of their time, their ideas and in several cases, making financial donations to Plek.

#### *Support from Unconventional Literature And*

Yet, since earlier in this paper I observed that management literature on nonprofit associations in general and on the topic of values and volunteers in particular was incomplete and because I was vaguely aware of the limitations of a values orientation through my participation in the DMan program, I turned to scholarship outside the nonprofit management domain and, indeed, conventional management. Because values figured prominently in the Plek narrative, I looked for insights on ideology in the writing of several sociologists, psychologists and organizational theorists, namely Hans Joas, Ralph D. Stacey, George Herbert Mead and Norbert Elias. In doing so, I sought to make

fuller sense of the experience in this Plek narrative and make a contribution to the discourse on nonprofit associations.

In this alternative literature I found strong support for Mason's and Fumkin's emphasis on the expressive component of nonprofit organizational life and the value such an orientation brings in attracting and connecting people around worthy purposes. The compelling nature of values exhibited in the PD MRSA story is what Joas wrote about value commitments as not restrictive but rather representing "the highest expression of our free will" and the experience of feeling "I can do no other" (Joas, 2000, p. 5).

Many important purposes, these authors contend, are served by values. Subscription to a set of values enables individuals to work together towards common purposes. They draw people towards an idealized future and promote coordinated action in pursuit of this future (Mead, 1934). They create connections between these individuals, drawing them together as a group.

In going beyond the nonprofit literature on expressive values, these writers observe that the feeling of belonging and membership, a "we-ness", is what enables people to work collectively and cooperatively (Stacey, 2007). Elias put it this way:

As more and more people must attune their conduct to that of others, the web of actions must be organized more and more strictly and accurately, if each individual action is to fulfill its social function. Individuals are compelled to regulate their conduct in an increasingly differentiated, more even and stable manner.

(Elias, 2000, pp. 367-368)

In addition, values aid in the decision-making process. Stacey notes how choices are made on "evaluative criteria provided by ideology" (Stacey, 2007, p. 511). He adds that values together with norms, interpreted as restrictions, can be viewed as ideology (Stacey, 2007). In numerous meaningful ways, the values exhibited in Plek made the MRSA project possible and opened up the potential for introducing some fresh approaches to quality improvement in U.S. hospitals. These values helped a committed group of people come together. Many gave generously of their time. Their efforts seemed to be subtly

guided and coordinated not by a heavy hand but by some understandings and beliefs volunteers brought and shaped. Together, the group was starting to make some progress on MRSA prevention at HCACH and opening up new possibilities with other hospitals.

Thus, we see a general concordance of views on the beneficial value of values and their expression in organizations between writers from the nonprofit field and the alternative literature. Beyond this, however, the two strands of thinking *diverge*.

Any serious hint of discord is seen by Frumkin, Mason and other nonprofit researchers as unhealthy and destructive. Their focus is solely on the benefits of values. The role of the skilled nonprofit manager, they contend, is to manage conflict and difference (read smooth over and deal with in a manner that minimizes the potential for real problems) and align values. Listen to what they have to say.

- “In fact, one of the core tasks of nonprofit leaders is aligning and interpreting a broad and complex set of values in the context of social and community problems that require action” (Frumkin, 2002, p. 103).
- “Given that a group’s cultural values are at its core, any internal clash of competing values can crack the core and devastate the organization...” (Mason, 1996, p. 110).

What is most striking about the conception of values and ideology developed by Joas, Stacey, Mead, and Elias is its *paradoxical* nature. What Stacey calls the “darker side” is not generally found in the management literature on nonprofit associations. “The description of values...may easily be taken as meaning that values are unequivocally good...this is not so” (Stacey, 2007, p. 493).

So, by bringing in new voices to make sense of this Plek narrative, we find support for the view on values found in nonprofit management literature and more: a caution to be alert for the paradoxes inherent in the expression of values in organizational life. With this new and radically challenging perspective in mind, let us return to the narrative.

### *Encouraging Developments at HCACH*

Fast forward almost one year to June, 2006. Some encouraging stories were starting to emerge from HCACH about the level of staff engagement and interaction in implementing improved infection control practices. Some unlikely suspects like cleaning staff, van drivers, and kitchen workers were uncovering positive deviants and coming up with innovative practices to stem the transmission of MRSA. The results on MRSA rates were equally encouraging. Hospital-wide MRSA infection rates, along with those of many other infections, had dropped by 50% and been maintained at this level for six months.

Officials in HCA's (Health Care of America) Washington headquarters started to hear about this welcome progress and were soon visiting Cleveland. With a pace and sense of urgency I had not witnessed before in a federal agency, officials organized a national MRSA Prevention Initiative, allocated \$1,000,000 in a matter of days, they appointed Arnold Lee, MD, to lead the effort, began informing all 160 HCA hospitals of the plans, and selected eighteen to serve as initial pilot sites. They named the initiative "Getting to Zero".

Because of the potential for learning we saw in this national effort, the possibility of linking with the Plek-led MRSA project, and the reputation of HCA as a national leader in quality improvement, we enthusiastically offered to help Drs. Lee and Lindstrom bring HCA's MRSA prevention plans to life. In regular phone calls, Bob Graber, Norbert Strong, James Lindstrom, Arnold Lee and I explored how to inform HCA hospital leaders about the experience at HCACH, how to expose them to positive deviance, how to uncover HCA hospitals with the drive and openness to employ PD, and how to provide effective PD facilitation.

During a call I had with Arnold, after he invited Bob and me to help plan and facilitate a meeting with national HCA staff, I informed him that Plek and Positive Deviance Initiative staff would not be able to continue providing educational and consulting services on a volunteer basis. "Plek is a small non-profit organization that depends on contributions and income from services and conferences to survive," I said. Up until this point, the Strongs had provided their services at no cost and I had never asked the HCA to compensate Plek for its assistance. The need to break the pattern of donated services hit me when James told me that Arnold was going to ask everyone attending the planning

meeting to pay for their meal at a get-acquainted dinner. Arnold acknowledged my request by asking that I put together a budget for PD support for him to look over and also offered to cover our travel expenses, including the dinner costs, for the Cleveland planning session.

Over the next week I worked to shape a proposal and budget for HCA. I sought feedback on early drafts from James, Bob and several other Plek members who were serving as PD consultants to the Plek beta sites. I sent Arnold the end product on July 24 and suggested we organize a conference call with James, Bob and the two of us to talk about any questions he had and also to share the thinking behind the proposal.

Over the next few days there were some tense discussions because HCA leaders had not included any significant funds in the “Getting to Zero” budget to support PD in the hospitals and those who supervised Arnold’s work as leader of the national MRSA effort were not well-acquainted with positive deviance. In these discussions Bob challenged Arnold to exert more leadership and I informed Arnold that Plek was not prepared to assist HCA with PD facilitation unless there was a clear commitment from HCA leaders and the allocation of sufficient funds to do the work well. In a concluding phone call he told me his superiors, were “110% behind the proposal and the PD approach.” He noted that he had begun working through the formal mechanics of HCA’s contracting process and asked me for a few more details on the proposal.

### *Surprise from a Key Volunteer*

Later that week I was surprised when James Lindstrom called quite distressed. He read me the invitation he and I had helped draft that had just been sent out to those being invited to the HCA hospital MRSA national kickoff meeting. Some changes had been made. The one James found upsetting was a reference inserted, he thought by Dr. Lee, which gave equal credit to the Toyota Production System (TPS) and PD processes for improvements in MRSA transmission rates. “Mixed, confusing messages will be sent, the true story will not be told. I am *tired* of fighting this battle and will retire if it is not resolved,” James said in sad, angry tones. Several weeks before James had received a letter from senior leaders of Regional Center for Health Improvement (RCHI), the organization responsible for introducing the Toyota Production System methodology into

healthcare in the region. It accused him of using powerpoint slides from RCHI without attribution and wrongly questioning the value of TPS in healthcare and at HCACH during a presentation he gave at a national patient safety conference. I was at this event and was familiar with the story he tells about the MRSA reduction experience at HCACH. In my opinion, James recounts the MRSA story accurately and does not denigrate TPS. He acknowledges that it led to success on one unit, created awareness that reducing MRSA transmissions was possible, while observing that the process was expensive, led to dependence on TPS experts, and did not facilitate hospital-wide progress on MRSA. Here is part of the letter:

Dear Dr. Lindstrom (James),

With surprise and regret, we have been informed of a slide presentation currently posted on the AHRQ website and delivered by you at the recent *AHRQ Patient Safety and Health IT Conference*, held June 4-6. The presentation in question is “Applying LEAN in Healthcare: Prospects and Challenges of Eliminating Healthcare-associated MRSA Infections.”

Unfortunately, the presentation totally disregarded Allen’s contribution and ownership of the work of the slides. At no point during your talk or on the website do you make appropriate attribution. We are saddened at this breach of traditional academic respect and protocol....

Obviously, we must protect the representation of our initiatives by any professional who harbors an express animosity toward diligent, sincere, and substantive efforts to eradicate infection. It is important to have our good work presented in a manner that is informed, respectful, fair.

James had devoted the last several years of his life to MRSA elimination. He was being paid for part-time work by the CDC and HCA for his help at HCACH. He worked tirelessly. It was not unusual to get emails or calls from James on nights and weekends. James had become an important volunteer in the PD work of Plek. He freely shared his experiences at HCACH with others and tapped into many connections he built in his distinguished surgical career to expand interest in PD. I told James I would be willing to

write a letter to RCHI sharing my observations on the story he tells about HCACH. James is not the only volunteer member of the Plek PD MRSA team we depend upon. Lucinda Forbert and Jeremey Johnson are enthusiastic participants and give of their time generously. With James, Bob, and Norbert and Mary Strong, we have a dedicated and talented group. My concern was that we might lose James.

Our conversation then moved back to Dr. Lee. I told him I too was concerned that as we began our collaboration with HCA hospitals, the MRSA experience told by various HCACH staff was likely to be confusing. We agreed that this was partly due to the fact that collectively the staff had not made sense of what had happened in their facility, so understandably individuals would have differing interpretations. I offered to convey this concern to Dr. Lee as we prepared for the August kickoff meeting.

Friday morning I called Arnold for two reasons: to see if he needed anything else on the proposal before I headed on vacation and to discuss our fear that HCACH staff would tell inconsistent stories about the hospital's MRSA effort at the kickoff meeting. I expressed the concern by going back to the July planning meeting where various hospital officials attributed success in the MRSA campaign to a variety of factors. While noting that many of these and other factors likely influenced the outcome, I recounted my understanding that PD was the key factor. "You have it exactly right. This is my understanding of the story too," Arnold replied. "We have been making progress in the last six weeks on clarifying our MRSA experience with key staff."

Raj closed the conversation by saying how much he thought of Plek and his work with Norbert, Bob and me. "I believe we are on the brink together of making a real difference on the MRSA epidemic in this country and showing another way forward on healthcare quality."

### *Dealing with Growth*

On August 17, the first day of HCA's national MRSA Prevention Initiative "Getting to Zero", a \$472,000 contract for Plek consulting and educational support was executed. After signing the contract, we had to figure out who would comprise the consulting team for each hospital. The general idea was to partner Norbert Strong with one consultant

from the Plek network who had demonstrated the ability to provide effective support for one of the JHF beta sites. As I sorted through the options, considered who could be available and Norbert Strong's observations about the most capable partners, I recognized that Nancy Carroll, one of my board members, probably should not be selected. She seemed less confident in her PD facilitation and had no prior consulting experience in healthcare. I also recognized that I would need to deliver this decision. After putting this off for a while, I called to explain what had happened and why. I gingerly told her that Norbert and I thought she needed some additional experience before taking on a hospital client. I remember trying to lighten the burden on me by recalling a comment she had made about how much she had to learn about PD and also about her lack of healthcare consulting experience. I also told her that if our PD consulting work grew further, I would look for opportunities for her. It was an awkward, guarded conversation. Nancy acknowledged she was disappointed.

Several weeks later, I received a call from a staff member from a HCA hospital in West Virginia that was not part of the first phase of the MRSA initiative. She noted that the hospital's chief medical officer and executive director had heard about PD and wanted to engage Plek to provide PD support. I shared this opportunity with Norbert Strong and asked what he thought about trying a PD project without his direct involvement, noting that in order to build the capacity to reach many hospitals we had to move to a model that relied more on others. He appreciated this need, so we spoke about putting together a team up to the challenge. I also thought about the possibility of involving Nancy as part of a team with some partners. I spoke with Nancy about this and the idea of partnering her with James Lindstrom, who knew PD and had a broad healthcare background, and perhaps Lucinda Forbert. Nancy was pleased about this development and told me about her deep interest in doing work on healthcare quality given some very intense, recent family experiences involving a critically-ill brother.

Growing interest in PD evidenced by this HCA contact and inquiries from other hospitals triggered discussions among Plek trustees, our small PD consulting team, and me about scaling up our capacity. We asked, "What if some of our beta sites and HCA hospitals demonstrate significant reductions in MRSA transmissions and this generates a huge demand for PD facilitation? How would we respond? After all there are more than 6,000 hospitals in the country." This led to a decision to reach out to other skilled consultants



known to members of the current PD consulting team to see if they would be interested in learning about PD and joining the Plek team. In these discussions I can remember an expressed desire to seek people "like us". This understanding showed up in an email exchange between Elizabeth and Bob.

November 6, 2006

Hi all...

I've been thinking about the "characteristics" of our current team as a 'pattern' we may want to replicate in expanded team members ...

1. experience working with large, complex organizations
2. already using approaches that include; whole system in the room, self-organization, positive psychology framework ... And also perhaps elements like storytelling
3. member of Plek - participating in learning community around ideas that frame our work like emergence, social networks, etc.
4. attended one or more workshops/training events on positive deviance (or will attend in future)
5. observed one or more kick-offs at MRSA project sites (or will observe in future)
6. participates in 'apprentice' role on a MRSA site team

And, obviously, people we respect and would enjoy working with ....

\* Elizabeth

Bob replied the next day.

Elizabeth,

The selection criteria you propose are fine and were for me what I considered in selecting candidates except that I didn't put Plek membership as a condition.

Bob

No one else weighed in on the online conversation. Like me, they probably thought this was the obvious way to go.

### *A Board Conversation*

During board meetings in this period we devoted time to the PD MRSA work. At the November 2006 meeting it was one of many topics on the agenda. After I introduced the objectives for the meeting and said a few things about agenda items, Kevin James took up the role of meeting facilitator. On the first couple topics he attempted to begin the discussion by asking each trustee to share a thought about the topic before inviting open conversation. These instructions were not heeded despite a couple attempts to “get them back on track”. Knowing we had a great deal of ground to cover and aware of our 3:30 ending time, I was getting a bit anxious and considered intervening. Upon reflection, I decided to hold back and let things flow. Perhaps this little rebellion against Kevin’s structure meant some trustees had some things to say and did not want to be constrained.

Soon after this Elizabeth Gardener said, “I’ll own my reaction and take responsibility” as part of a discussion on a mildly contentious issue. This meeting took place following a two-day Plek conference on relationship-centered healthcare, complexity and interdisciplinary teams. An aspect of the coaching that was part of this session involved helping participants reflect on the role emotions played conversations.

Later in the meeting, when we were talking about follow-up on a recent Plek conference on social networks and Dan Hutchens raised some questions about the direction planned, Elizabeth’s eyes began to redden and well with tears. She said something like, “Where have you been? We’ve been working hard on this since a plan was accepted at our January board meeting. Have I been *wasting* all my time?” Dan replied quietly, “I am sorry. I didn’t realize all this. I’ll be more attentive in the future.” This led to a discussion about the flow of information among trustees, about taking responsibility for keeping one another up-to-date on important Plek projects and the idea of designating a staff member to support regular reporting on important initiatives.

Elizabeth added she had also been quite upset at the April board meeting because the social network project was not on the agenda, despite all the work that had been done. Almost the entire meeting was devoted to experimenting with a planning process. She glanced quickly at Bob who was mostly responsible for this decision. Elizabeth acknowledged that by raising the matter at the meeting, some time had then been earmarked for a discussion. The time, she felt was insufficient, so she said she basically checked out of the meeting and decided not to press the point further. Dan added that he had checked out also.

Later, in a discussion about the dismissal of Jackie Miller, senior vice president, and a critical four-page letter she had sent to all trustees, including me, Nancy said, “I have to admit that I noticed during the April board meeting in Seattle that the relationship between Jackie and Curt didn’t seem to be working, and I didn’t say or do anything with this observation. It was even worse in July; you could cut the air with a knife, and again I kept quiet. Hoping and waiting was apparently not a good strategy.”

What happened next was a wide-ranging discussion about openness and airing differences. I noted that in my explorations of board conversational dynamics conducted as part of my doctoral studies, I was surprised to discover that some of my attempts to foster more debate and bring out differences unwittingly sustained what I had called an appreciative, conflict averse pattern. Bob asked, “Are we really saying we want to be more open? Are we agreeing to a standard of greater openness? I must say that my pattern has been otherwise; assuming that this is what was desired. I have tended to share my concerns about the board and about Curt, only with Curt. I can change this if you want.” There was a general acknowledgement that this goal made sense. I observed that it seemed to be happening.

Elizabeth, toward the end of the meeting said, “I feel better.” While at times this was an intense, emotional meeting, I felt we had made some progress on airing differences and sharing thoughts that had been “in the room” for a while.

*Exploring the Paradoxical Perspective*

Earlier in the paper the paradoxical nature of values was introduced. This topic will be opened up further through a reexamination of the PD MRSA narrative. We will find the story *suffused* with paradoxes. To begin this reexamination, let us return to Stacey.

The description of values...may easily be taken as meaning that values are unequivocally good...this is not so. The notion of cult values, the power dynamics of inclusion and exclusion they involve...focus our attention on the *darker* (italics added) aspects of values.

(Stacey, 2007, p. 493)

Drawing on Mead, Stacey adds that if values are applied in a manner that neither tolerates variation nor allows for judgment in their application in particular circumstances, the possibility of change has been greatly diminished. What results is a cult that requires conformity at all costs. When judgment is exercised, difference and conflict will be the natural result, and the possibility of novelty will ensue.

Elias, in his work *The Established and the Outsiders*, stresses the natural tendency of humans to divide people into two groups, those who are in one's group and those who are not, to maintain one's power position (Elias & Scotson, 1994). Ideology (values) is enlisted to sustain these differences. This inclination also involves simplistic divisions, ascribing "goodness" to us, the "in" group, and "badness" to them, the "out" group. Such tendencies have important implications.

- They limit possibilities for interaction between the established and the outsiders.
- Because people understandably wish to maintain their status within their group and avoid the shame of exclusion, they find it difficult to challenge the validity and recognize the limitations of the group's values. Elias writes, "participation in a group's superiority is...the reward for submitting to group-specific norms" (Elias & Scotson, 1994, p. xxiii).

Such orientations help sustain the current order and dampen possibilities for change. Stacey writes: "...while diversity is essential for the evolution of novelty such diversity can easily become polarized and stuck, so blocking the emergence of novel patterns of relating" (Stacey, 2007, p. 505).

What is especially challenging in working with these human tendencies is suggested by Joas' statement, "I can do no other" (Joas, 2000, p. 5). What he is emphasizing is the taken-for-granted nature of this human behavior. Stacey speaks of values unconsciously guiding decisions around what we believe "to be right" (Stacey, 2007, p. 489). He further contends that "ideology is a form a conversation that preserves the current order by making it *seem natural* (italics added)" (Stacey, 2003b, p. 325).

The ideological basis of our choices of action have become so ingrained in who we are that we are mainly unaware of just what this ideological basis is. This point...is of great importance because ideology deeply conditions the way we think about what we do, or should do, in organizations.

(Stacey, 2007, p. 489)

This challenge is *compounded* by the fact the conventional nonprofit management literature is essentially silent on the paradox of values, thus making the invisible even more so.

### *The Essential, But Limiting Value of Values*

With these new insights in mind, we can lift the veil of invisibility and see the Plek PD MRSA story in more of its dimensions. Let us revisit the narrative.

### *Wide-spread Engagement and Participation Will Lead to Better Performance And...*

Active *involvement* of many players – from James, Lucinda, Bob, Elizabeth, Norbert, Rose Marie, Arnold and Nancy – was a *major* reason why the PD MRSA initiative grew over time, contributed to the development of Plek, and opened up new opportunities such as The James Healthcare Foundation grant and HCA contract. *Simultaneously*, it led to the formation of a group of people very committed to this initiative, which one could call Elias' "established". These individuals would undoubtedly relate to Joas' observation about the attractive, compelling nature of values, "the highest expression of our free will" and the experience of "I can do no other" (Joas, 2000, p. 5). A natural consequence of the coming together of the Plek group was seen when we went to expand the PD consulting

network. We searched for people “*like us*”. Remember the email exchange between Elizabeth and Bob which no one challenged? We were deliberately looking to enlarge the “established” group. In so doing we were at the same time insuring that no “outsiders” were welcomed into membership and thus, as Stacey notes, sustaining the current order and limiting the diversity that is the lifeblood of change and novelty (Stacey, 2007). This observation is evidence of the paradoxical nature of values and ideology and suggests that one could reasonably expand the heading of this section to read: Wide-spread engagement and participation will lead to better performance **AND** concomitantly restrict opportunities for change and engagement.

*Involving Staff Who Bring Diverse Perspectives and Experiences Is Essential to Change And...*

Inviting Norbert Strong to participate in the July 2004 workshop with the Harvard Center and connecting with others from outside the Plek membership attracted to PD and who, like Norbert, brought *different* backgrounds and views to the work of Plek, led to the PD MRSA initiative. Perhaps this happened so easily because the PD process was closely aligned with the values and ideology at play in the organization. A consequence of this adoption was the automatic, uncritical rejection of alternative approaches, like the Toyota Production System, to tackling the MRSA challenge. One can find in the narrative about the work with HCA several instances of protecting PD and challenging the value of TPS. Recall James’s insistence on getting the HCACH MRSA story right and my efforts to reinforce James by telling Dr. Lee of my concern his staff would provide an inconsistent and confusing accounting of the HCACH MRSA success. Recall, how I immediately came to the defense of James, a member of the “established”, from an attack by RCHI. Recall too Elias’ observation the “established” attribute goodness to themselves and badness to “outsiders”.

As I reflect on these understandable actions, I now realize how rote they were. I did not explore alternative ways of reacting or, at minimum, appreciate how the decisions I made in response to James’s distress were limiting. We did not examine why TPS and PD were adopted to the exclusion of the other methodologies or what could be learned from the TPS experience and RCHI. Neither had I realized the adoption of PD in Plek was never subjected to real critical examination. Sheepishly, I must admit that “beside the point, this

is not what I am writing about” was my reaction to an observation from my faculty supervisor on the first draft of this paper.

...what really struck me about the narrative was the evangelic nature of the PD effort. PD seems to be the cause, the light and the way and is embraced with a kind of religious fervor...There is a strong call for commitment and not a whiff of any critique.

Now, I can better appreciate that this was “the point” and helped me appreciate the observations by Joas, Stacey and others about the taken-for-granted “rightness” of one’s values and ideology and the dangers inherent in this ready acceptance.

Now I see how the value of diversity, when applied, holds the concurrent and unavoidable potential for constraining diversity. Our Plek team found its way to PD out of genuine regard for the importance of diversity, yet we were not inclined to critically explore this methodology, rejected opportunities to understand more fully the HCACH story which employed other approaches to improvement, and did not seek out conversations or relationships with those who promoted alternate methodologies.

One could label this the *PD paradox*. We were concurrently bringing out and protecting PD from deviance.

Involving people who bring diverse perspectives and experiences is essential to change **And** will concurrently trigger unconscious efforts to limit engagement with additional diversity.

*New Relationships and Connections, When Nurtured, Will Stimulate New Ways Forward and Generate New Opportunities And...*

Nancy Carroll was not actively involved in the initial phases of the MRSA effort, probably because she had just joined the board of trustees and was “learning the ropes” and trying to fit in. However, it soon became evident that she had some deeply personal reasons for joining the effort. She saw her brother, who because of a life-threatening chronic illness, encounter first-hand the shortcomings of the U.S. healthcare system. The

consequences of quality failures in hospitals were all too real for Nancy. With such deep motivation and her background as an organizational change consultant, we welcomed Nancy to our PD team. She became an enthusiastic apprentice, a member of the “establishment” and gave willingly of her time in attending PD workshops and serving as a “junior” member of small consulting teams we organized to support the PD process in several hospital beta sites. Her different ways of thinking sometimes triggered new insights. She would ask periodically, “did you notice”, inquiring about a pattern that had not been evident to others. She articulated her lack of confidence in consulting in hospitals, a new venue for her, and her facility with the PD process. Perhaps it was witnessing this lack of surety and her at times different ways which led Norbert Strong and me to conclude that Nancy should not be appointed as a lead consultant with an HCA hospital. I can remember multiple conversations with Norbert Strong about the importance of being successful in our work with the first few PD hospitals, doing all we could to help insure this success and not taking unnecessary risks. I wondered as I wrote this if Nancy’s lack of surety was a manifestation of her attempt to introduce some new ideas or questions into the PD work while conforming sufficiently to the “established” patterns of the insiders.

My job became to inform her of this decision, while minimizing damage to our relationship. After all, Nancy, was a board member, and I was relying on her for advice on our annual fundraising campaign. One can say that conflict emerged in ongoing efforts by members of the “established” group to protect themselves and in this case led to an insider being moved to outsider status, at least temporarily. What did not run through my mind was a question. Could Nancy’s idiosyncrasies and lack of healthcare experience be valuable to us and the overall MRSA campaign? Such matters were not in my initial thinking about the HCA PD consulting team assignments or in my conversation with Nancy about not being selected. It is conceivable that Nancy’s exclusion could have led to a rupture of her relationship with Plek and me and that by not working with her different ways we may have closed off options for improving the PD MRSA initiative.

Thus, new relationships and connections, when nurtured, will stimulate new ways forward and generate new opportunities **And** concurrently lead to conflict and exclusion. How this conflict is understood and negotiated by those involved will bear on whether the new relationships continue to be generative.



*“Appreciative and Conflict-Free”, or “Let’s Be Positive And...”*

In the immediately preceding sections of this paper which dealt with the paradoxical nature of ideology in organizations, multiple examples of the hidden, dark side of the paradox were uncovered in the Plek PD MRSA story. It is my sense that this dark side was further shielded from light by the continually recreated “appreciative and conflict-free” pattern within Plek. Evidence for this conclusion can be found in Project Three and in the PD MRSA narrative, especially in the portion dedicated to the November board meeting conversation. Here Bob, chairperson of the board said, “Are we really saying we want to be more open? Are we agreeing to a standard of greater openness? I must say that my pattern has been otherwise; assuming that this is what was desired.” He was probably not alone.

It is my sense that what was helping sustain this pattern were the circumstances Plek faced: a nonprofit association which depended on many volunteers and was financially insecure. Making sure these volunteers felt their services were appreciated and they had ongoing opportunities to express their values seemed essential to maintaining their commitment, the enterprise of Plek, and the PD MRSA project. As emphasized in the nonprofit literature reviewed earlier, the actions of volunteers are affected by appealing to their values, not by coercive means or financial incentives. Remember Frumkin’s admonition, “Harnessing and managing the expressive dimension... becomes a strategic necessity” (Frumkin, 2002, p. 103)?

Many complexity scientists and scholars who study organizations from a complexity perspective argue repeated and periodic stable patterns restrict change because they do not display far-from-equilibrium dynamics. They are “less adaptable and less able to cope with a constantly unpredictably changing environment” (Goldberger, 1997, p. 547). Stacey and Griffin observe patterns of relating with a periodic rhythm are “inappropriate for dealing with the fluidity of ordinary, everyday life...” (Stacey & Griffin, 2005, p. 7). It seemed like in Plek we were witnessing a self-organizing process that was reproducing repetitive patterns of interacting. Nolan, in writing about stability in a consulting organization, argues similarly.

...stuckness is an active, unintended, emergent pattern whereby power relations between practitioners and the interlocking of their identities constrain the inquiry into practice which might lead to its transformation.

(Nolan, 2005, p. 81)

Yet, when one looks more closely at several board meeting narratives, it becomes clear that while this appreciative pattern was being sustained through interactions among trustees, including me, it simultaneously held the potential for change. Witness the shift in the whole tenor of the meeting conversation, seemingly triggered by something different: Elizabeth's observation, "I'll own my reaction" and her outburst, "Have I been wasting my time?" So, here was a value that had been sustained, producing what Stacey terms a global pattern, being changed by what he calls local, micro-interactions (Stacey, 2005). And perhaps my decision not to steer the meeting back to the agenda played a part in creating this new pattern. In speaking with several trustees after the November meeting, there was concurrence that although the meeting had been tense and emotional at times, we had loosened the strangle-hold of our appreciative ways. It was good, they felt.

This experience suggests that values and ideology are not fixed, something one must simply appeal to or allow expression of as suggested in the nonprofit management literature, but rather understandings or themes that are continually recreated as patterns of interaction. As such, they always hold the potential for change.

Something similar can be seen in the story about moving towards the contract between Plek and HCA. Arnold Lee and I had established an amiable relationship which was clearly able to deal with minor conflicts and differences of opinion. Yet, as we faced a more contentious issue surrounding significant financial and leadership commitments, Bob sensed, I believe, this pattern, partially sustained by my "sometimes you are too nice" orientation and Dr. Lee's cautious bureaucratic demeanor, would not allow us to work through the issues. Hence, his interventions: challenging Arnold in one of our calls to simply not accept the decision of his superiors about the Plek proposal and pointing out my appreciative-only inclinations. Perhaps it was Bob's actions that led Arnold to take steps to avoid being excluded from the established group, thus denying HCA hospitals the opportunity to employ PD.

Stacey, drawing on Elias, would likely view this shifting pattern as related to a change in power relations. To utilize PD in the HCA system, Arnold was dependent upon Plek. This undoubtedly became clear to him when he learned that we were not prepared to go ahead unless certain conditions were met. Such a shift in power is directly related to membership in the established group and such threats to who is in and who is out, observes Stacey, trigger anxiety and moves to deal with this feeling (Stacey, 2003a). This can be deduced from several of Dr. Lee's statements during our negotiations – “to withdraw at this point would be premature” and “our relationship goes beyond this particular initiative” – and his immediate action to secure approval from his superiors.

While the “appreciative and conflict-free”, or “let's be positive” pattern helps sustain volunteer participation, it Also works to block the expression of conflict that is inherent in the expression of values and shields the paradox of values from view.

### *Summing Up And*

In the beginning of this paper I posed a question. Are nonprofit associations different from other types of organizations? From this research on values and volunteers, I conclude the answer is *yes*. Nonprofit associations by their very nature are highly values-oriented. The purpose of these organizations is to advance some socially beneficial cause. It is why they are formed and what attracts volunteer participation. As shown earlier, this reliance of voluntary engagement combined with the unsure and weak financial position of many nonprofit associations creates what I termed values dependency.

Only a few organizational scholars of nonprofits have seriously taken up the issue of values. Research in this paper provides support for the work they have done which emphasizes the importance of enabling and managing the expressive dimension in nonprofit associations. This stream of inquiry and the alternative literature highlight the positive, beneficial aspects of values. They attract and sustain participation of volunteers, generate donations of time and money, and foster cooperation and collective action. The analysis of values left at this point, which is where most management writers concerned with nonprofits associations and NGOs conclude their analysis, leads to the conclusion that managers should resolve issues arising from conflicts over values. Such work is

required to sustain the organization and its attractiveness to volunteers. Such writers do not see the *darker* side of values illuminated in this narrative.

While supporting some existing research findings on values, this project contributes new insights into the implications of values dependency in nonprofit associations, answering the calls by some organizational theorists for fresh thinking about the distinctive nature of nonprofits and their management. Such a call is heard in the conclusion by Salamon, “Few aspects of American society are as poorly understood or as obscured by mythology as the thousands of...organizations that comprise America’s private, nonprofit sector” (Salamon, 1999, p. 7). By examining some alternative literature in light of the Plek narrative, strong evidence has been provided on the fundamentally paradoxical nature of values in nonprofit associations, and hence the conclusion articulated earlier on the essential but limiting value of values.

As was shown on multiple occasions in this narrative, employment of values in decision making, called functionalization by Mead (Mead, 1934), on specific issues in specific circumstances inevitably triggers conflict and difference. This happens when there is an appeal to single values and when there are multiple values in play, which because they are different must also be incompatible at times.

If conflicts are *only* viewed as threatening to the health of the organization, managers will naturally see their responsibility as resolving or quelling the differences. They will *only* see the differences as threatening the continued engagement and goodwill of its volunteers. What would not be appreciated in such an orientation is that it could lead to organizational stagnation and a diminished ability to adapt and change. We saw in this account several instances where paradox was not recognized and where potential conflict from the enactment of values was averted. Remember how I responded to James Lindstrom’s threat to leave? We also saw instances where conflict and difference were allowed to play out and where change and seeming improvement emerged. Remember the difficult board meeting discussion and the new understanding on airing differences that resulted? In this instance, I and perhaps others consciously did not seek to limit the expression of differences by, for instance, insisting it was time to move to another agenda topic. Of course, this involved a risk too. Allowing expression could have led to some

negative consequences; some trustees, key Plek volunteers, could have been driven away. So, we see there are risks on both sides of the equation.

Reflecting on this experience, however, has helped me become more aware that frequently the source of friction and conflict is the paradoxical nature of values and their expression. Such awareness has enabled me to better tolerate the messiness and uncertainty of organizational paradox and be more inclined to work with and raise paradoxical positions even though this comes with risk. What may come of this is the possibility of avoiding permanent residence in the value dependency trap.

This understanding also leads me to conclude Stacey's characterization of one dimension of a paradox as the *darker side* as partially misleading. While at times one dimension may feel like the darker side because it is threatening to the current order, its ever-present existence is essential for change and the emergence of novelty. The darker side is the lighter side, the lighter side the darker side, and they are inextricably bound.

Working with paradox is not simple. It calls to mind the book title *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Heifetz, 1994).

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## SYNOPSIS AND CRITICAL APPRAISAL

Submitted September 2007

*Moving from rich experiences of history to valid inferences about history involves a logic that is not very well defined.*

(March, Sproull, & Tamuz, 1991, p. 8)

### *Opening Thoughts and Structure of the Synopsis*

To begin the Synopsis and Critical Appraisal of my thesis, I will address the organization of this chapter and the rationale for this organization. The chapter will include:

- a discussion of the sense I am making of all the projects, with special attention to the major themes developed in the thesis and expressed in the title – *Leading Volunteers: Power Relations and Values in Organizations*;
- comments on how my leadership thinking and practice changed over the course of the research interspersed with examples of how these changes were affected by the research process;
- an elaboration and account of the research methods used in my research placed in context of qualitative research methods and my experience; and
- a summary of my contributions to the literature on nonprofit associations and the practice of nonprofit association leadership.

I am proceeding in this manner to illuminate and underscore the *emergent and reflexive nature of this research* and to facilitate understanding of how my research approach, thinking and leadership practice changed over this course of study. I am also proceeding in this manner because the research methods and the constellation of methods underlying the DMan program are not well understood and because I believe the juxtaposition of my research, analysis and the research processes employed will enable the reader to critically evaluate my findings since it will be clear how they were derived.

The emergent nature of research and the importance of making research methods explicit are topics developed by Dewey in *Experience and Nature*. In this work he proposed that

reflection on an experience becomes the basis for further inquiry, which then forms the basis for further inquiry, and so on (Dewey, 1958). He also observed that because experience cannot be fully captured and because what we decide to recount and reflect upon are evaluative choices, we are obligated to make clear how we have gone about our research.

Selective emphasis, choice is inevitable, whenever reflection occurs. This is not an evil. Deception comes only when the presence and operation of choice is concealed, disguised, denied.

(Dewey, 1958, p. 29)

This synopsis is written for leaders of nonprofit organizations reliant on voluntary participation and for scholars who study these interesting organizations.

### *Setting the Stage: The Sector and the Mainstream Literature*

In addressing the primary themes which emerged in this thesis – leading volunteers, values, and power in nonprofit organizations – I believe it is important to provide some context for my research by examining the growing significance of the nonprofit sector in the U.S. and the management literature on the sector, particularly as it relates to the above themes.

As documented in Project Four, there is a remarkable growth in the number and importance of nonprofit organizations. During the second half of the twentieth century there was a sixty-fold increase in the number of secular nonprofit organizations, with the total in the United States surpassing 700,000 (Hall, 1992). Salamon, a leading scholar in the field, has explored the impact of this striking increase by observing that the revolution underway “may prove as significant to the latter twentieth century as the rise of the national state in the latter nineteenth century” and that “virtually all of America’s major social movements...have their roots in the nonprofit sector” (Salamon, 1994, p. 109).

Despite this picture, there is a surprising lack of serious study of the management and leadership of nonprofits. The recognition of this is widespread (Fowler, 2000; Heimovics, Herman, Coughlin, & Jurkiewicz, 1993; Knoke, 1986; Light, 2000; Salamon, 1999).

There seems to be a general assumption that nonprofit organizations are similar to corporations and governments and that it makes sense to adopt management practices and insights from these domains. Hence there is a very notable trend in nonprofit organizations to import models for organization and management developed for these sectors and strive to become more business-like and professionalize (Dees, 1998; Hall, 1992; Herman & Renz, 1999; Knoke & Prensky, 2006; Nutt & Backoff, 1992; Young, 1987; Young & Salamon, 2002). Some management theorists have begun to question this surge to embrace practices from the business world by noting that nonprofits are different from for-profit firms and government organizations in some important respects. Among the different features they point to are:

- the uncertainty, precariousness, and lack of control of resource flows (Heimovics, Herman, Coughlin, & Jurkiewicz, 1993; Knoke & Wood, 1981; Stone, Bigelow, & Crittenden, 1999);
- the existence of multiple constituencies whose needs and interests must be considered (Hall, 1990; Knoke & Prensky, 2006; Salamon, 2003; Stone, Bigelow, & Crittenden, 1999; Young, 1987); and,
- the central place of voluntary, noncompulsory participation in the operation of the organizations and the significant roles played by volunteers in trustee and service roles (Brudney, 2005; Frumkin, 2002; Knoke, 1981; Salamon, 1999).

These factors have led Anheier to coin the phrase “the law of nonprofit complexity” to connote the sometimes unique and special challenges of managing these organizations (Anheier, 2000, p. 7).

Another important finding from an extensive literature review conducted in conjunction with Project Four is that very little is written about the internal dynamics in nonprofit organizations and the management of volunteers and values. Knoke wrote, “researchers have largely neglected internal processes, very little is known about...decision-making or its consequences (Knoke, 1986, p. 12). Only a few organizational scholars have addressed what participation of volunteers means for nonprofit organizations and their management (Brudney, 2005; Frumkin, 2002; Heimovics, Herman, Coughlin, & Jurkiewicz, 1993; Herman, 2005; Herman & Heimovics, 2005; Jeavons, 2005; Knoke, 1986; Knoke, 1981; Mason, 1996).



The general picture that emerges from this overview is that the management of nonprofit organizations is generally neglected in management literature and that the omissions are especially glaring in the areas of internal dynamics, processes and the leadership of volunteers. This research is dedicated to filling in some of this generally blank canvas.

For the purposes of this synopsis, I will call organizations which feature a high degree of volunteer involvement nonprofit associations. This designation will help emphasize the voluntary, associational nature of these organizations and distinguish them from other nonprofit organizations, like many U.S. hospitals, which are not as reliant on volunteers for their existence and provision of services.

### *Setting the Stage: What is Written about Volunteers, Values and Power*

In this second stage-setting act I will review what the mainstream management literature on nonprofit associations has to say about the management of volunteers and the related issues of values and power. Later this literature will be placed in the larger context of writing about values and power.

There is minimal exploration of values in the nonprofit association literature. What is written treats values as something held by organizations. The term one most frequently encounters is “core values” (Herman, 2005; Jeavons, 2005). This concept is consistent with Courtney’s statement: “Values are the articulation of the desired culture of the organization...” (Courtney, 2002, p. 185). In his view the role of managers is to insure that values are clearly articulated, compliance with values is assessed, and that values are *put into practice* through ongoing training, policies, and role modeling.

The few other writers who address the topic of nonprofit association values emphasize the need for leaders to provide opportunities for volunteers to express their values: “harnessing and managing the expressive dimension”, say Jeavons, is a “strategic necessity” (Jeavons, 2005, p. 403). Frumkin and Mason echo this view (Frumkin, 2002; Mason, 1996) and others add that traditional means for motivating and controlling people in other types of organizations are not applicable with volunteers (Brudney, 2005; Edwards & Fowler, 2004a). Values are seen as vital to attracting and sustaining

engagement of volunteers and securing donations of their time and financial resources. Associated with these insights comes advice for managers to reduce and ameliorate conflict and differences among volunteers and insure that organizational values are shared (Hall, 1990; Knoke & Prenskey, 2006; Mason, 1996; Salamon, 2003; Young, 1987). Discord around values is viewed as unwanted and destructive. Insuring alignment of values and avoidance of clashes over values are thus seen as important responsibilities of nonprofit leaders (Frumkin, 2002; Mason, 1996). The failure to do so could be serious emphasizes Mason. “Given that a group’s cultural values are at its core, any internal clash over competing values can crack the core and devastate the organization” (Mason, 1996, p. 110). From this overview we see a two level orientation to values. They exist in organizations and individuals.

Some limited research on the management of commitment and detachment in voluntary organizations was conducted by Kanter, Herman, Heimovics, and Knoke (Farmer & Fedor, 1999; Heimovics, Herman, Coughlin, & Jurkiewicz, 1993; Herman & Heimovics, 2005; Kanter, 1968; Knoke, 1986; Knoke, 1981; Knoke & Wood, 1981). In summary, their research findings suggest that ongoing engagement of volunteers and volunteer trustees is facilitated by genuine involvement in decision-making, a democratic and partnership orientation, expressions to volunteers of appreciation by leaders, and the sharing of values. This research seems predicated on the view that nonprofit associations are highly dependent on volunteers and that power differentials between volunteers and association leaders is narrow and less than between leaders and staff in traditional business and governmental organizations (Brudney, 2005; Edwards & Fowler, 2004b; Edwards & Fowler, 2004a; Frumkin, 2002; Handy, 1988). While not speaking about management power directly, this general guidance from the literature suggests that managers should work to reduce power differentials with volunteers.

### *Benefits of this Orientation, and Some Early Skepticism*

I realized during the initial phases of my research that in my leadership activities in Plek Institute, a nonprofit association, I followed much of this guidance and believed in the underlying thinking. I built relationships with new volunteers like Norbert Strong, Lucinda Forbert and James Lindstrom in the PD MRSA effort and involved them closely in developing the Institute’s plans. I invited them to attend meetings of the Plek board of

trustees to express appreciation to them and further engage them in the work of the Institute. I invited trustees to become active in the PD MRSA initiative, realizing that they had something to contribute and also that this would be a very tangible way for them to “express” their values. Such a pattern was very much a part of how Plek operated. My role, as I viewed and practiced it, involved a gentle kind of facilitation.

Such strategies also seemed to be working. Plek was still in existence six years after its formation, some efforts like the consulting practice and the drive to reduce hospital-acquired infections through the positive deviance process, and overall interest in the work of the Institute was expanding modestly. The group of volunteers was staying together and in many cases members were willingly giving of their time and making financial contributions.

In Project Three I noticed a pattern of interacting in the organization and called it appreciative and conflict-free. I saw it as a consequence of working to build an organization that welcomed of people interested in complexity science and organization and recognized the creation and ongoing existence of Plek was dependent upon volunteers for their time and money. When the Institute was formed it had no financial resources.

This appreciative and conflict-free pattern was recognized and valued. In Project Three I included this comment that was contained in my performance evaluation:

Curt is fabulous at conveying his sense of appreciation for the contributions people make. Given our reliance on volunteers and voluntary contributions this is a critical skill and Curt is one of the best I’ve ever encountered (and a big reason why I’m willing to continue to contribute and participate).

As a result of my studies in the doctoral program and examining closely my own experience as a leader of a nonprofit association, Plek Institute, I began to sense the limitations and negative consequences of this pattern and the thinking and management scholarship that lay beneath it.

In Project Two, which dealt with my relationship with one Plek employee and an experiment with a new performance evaluation process, I first noticed a pattern of interacting similar to the one above. In describing it, I noted “We had a business-like relationship; most of our conversations were of a brief nature and dealt with Institute projects.” Claire, my colleague, described it this way: “You sat at your desk, I sat at mine.” This was meant to convey that our interactions were limited and brief. I also observed in my project narrative that I avoided any upsetting discussions with Claire because of the challenging family situation she faced. Underneath this strategy was a concern that if upset, Claire might leave the organization. After all, she was generally doing a good job and as an employee of a young nonprofit she was not making a competitive salary. Most likely she could earn more elsewhere. In some respects she was a part-time volunteer.

While I did not label this pattern appreciative and conflict-free, it had many of the characteristics I identified in the board interaction pattern which I explored in Project Three.

In examining my role in this pattern, thinking about the preceding performance evaluation I designed for Claire, and after conducting a literature review on performance evaluations, I realized that all were based on a systems thinking, particularly a type called systemic self-organization by Griffin (Griffin, 2002). In such systems, change is in line with intentions triggered by an external observer, who also is part of the system. The focus is on parts, in this case an employee, of the system, in this case an organization, and achieving change is done by affecting the parts. It assumes that organizational leaders, as separate parts in the system, can objectively determine what interventions can be applied and make other parts, and hence the entire organization, work more effectively. The general guidance offered in the management literature about performance evaluations fits this way of thinking: establish objectives for the individual based on the objectives of the organization; gather evidence on fulfillment of objectives; communicate findings to the employee; discuss what the employee needs to do about the findings; and develop a follow-up plan to measure compliance (Bacal, 2004; Gilliland & Langdon, 1998; Grote, 1996; Mohrman, Resnick-West, & Lawler, 1989). Goals are associated with stability, control, and alignment with organizational priorities.

This pattern of interacting Claire and I created became increasingly unsatisfactory to me given the experience I had in the evaluation several board members conducted of my performance and what I was learning in the doctoral program. I had a sense if we worked together on changing our habitual ways something better would emerge. In my mind were insights from complexity science that highly regular patterns were unhealthy and how Stacey took up this idea in human interactions.

Healthy, creative ordinarily effective human interaction is then always complex...  
Patterns of human relating that lose this complexity become highly repetitive and rapidly inappropriate for dealing with the fluidity of ordinary, everyday life...

(Stacey & Griffin, 2005, p. 7)

Also in my mind was a desire to reduce the power differential Claire experienced in our relationship as a means to develop healthier, more creative and free-flowing conversational patterns. The writing of Norbert Elias had an impact on my thinking. He emphasized the relational construction of power inherent in all relationships and questioned the conventional view that power was something held and employed by one person over another (Elias, 1970; Elias, 1998). He also wrote that a reduction in power differentials can lead to surprising outcomes not under the control of any party in a relationship.

...to the extent that the inequality in the strengths of the two players diminishes, there will result from the interweaving of moves of two individual people a game process *which neither of them has planned*.

(Elias, 1970, p. 82)

These concepts led me to propose to Claire that we craft a performance evaluation process together that was meaningful for her. I wanted her to have a real voice in this process. Such a shift in power, a shift in the pattern of interacting, are viewed by Stacey as vital for change and the emergence of new patterns (Stacey, 2003a). These shifts point to how emergence of novelty is dependent upon diversity, an insight from complexity science developed by Allen (Allen, 1998).

As we embarked on this process – which entailed designing the process, crafting questions for a feedback survey to those who worked with Claire, and conversing about the feedback – I began to notice that at times our conversations became much more dynamic. They would flow freely and periodically generate interesting and unanticipated insights and ideas. We talked, for instance, about the ethics of our relationship and the discomfort involved in dealing with a sensitive subject because one could not always predict the response it would generate. Claire came up with the idea of taking an online course on grant writing since she thought this might be helpful in developing our capability to attract additional external funding. Periodically, a seemingly small gesture or little comment would lead to a surprising result. As we were designing the process Claire asked what ideas from complexity science we could use in fashioning how to proceed. When I mentioned the concept of diversity, it triggered the idea of reaching out to journalists connected with Plek to provide assessments to Claire on the writing she did for the Institute's publications. She seized this opportunity and it seemed to affect the overall tenor of our conversation about the evaluation process.

To me these were examples of the complexity science concept of nonlinearity, where small changes sometimes lead to large changes. Stacey speaks of such small changes as being the seeds for potential transformation in human organizations (Stacey, 2003a).

Another new insight into relational dynamics and nature of power was an outgrowth of interactions with classmates in my learning set. One of the vital elements of the research process in the DMan program is sharing drafts of project narratives with faculty supervisors and colleagues in one's learning set and seeking feedback and new insights. One of my leaning set classmates, after becoming quite familiar with this narrative through reading previous drafts and from conversations at learning set meetings, pointed out Claire's inner strength and how she had used her power sometimes to close down consideration of an issue with which she was uncomfortable. Prior to this I had a more one-sided, less dynamic understanding of power: what could I do to reduce the power differential Claire experienced. These observations and the associated conversations led to a strong, visceral appreciation for the dynamic nature of power and to an understanding that there were times when I would need to exert power. I picked up and developed this thread further in my research on Project Four

The research connected with this performance evaluation experience and the literature I examined in this process led me to conclude the conventional management literature on performance evaluations was incomplete and, in many ways, shortsighted. It assumes that improvement is basically a function of actions by individuals, can be guided by managers and leads to predictable results, and that organizational performance is highly dependent on the behavior of individuals. My experience highlighted the central role of interactions among employees, the unpredictable nature of the process, the need to examine patterns and power, the profound affect the process can have on the manager, and the significance at times of small actions. Such points are not to be found in the mainstream discourse on the performance evaluations.

With this experience in hand and a newfound appreciation for the significance of patterns of relating in organizational life and of the impact of shifts in power in relationships, I approached my third and fourth projects where the themes of leading volunteers, power and values were taken up more directly.

### *The Genesis and Resilience of the Appreciative, Conflict-Free Pattern*

In Project Three I used extensive narratives to gain an understanding of the processes in place among important volunteers in Plek, members of the board of trustees. These narratives covered two board meetings. The most significant findings from my reflections on these meetings were the strength and resilience of the appreciative, conflict-free pattern of interacting and the active efforts to maintain this pattern. With such a pattern firmly entrenched, board conversations were generally superficial and uncritical; ideas and proposals were not vigorously examined. This was of concern to me.

As noted above, I believe the genesis of this pattern was partly related to the voluntary nature of the organization. As a nonprofit there was no start-up capital so funds had to be raised from contributors to support operations. As a nonprofit, we had to identify volunteers to serve as members of the board of trustees. We also had to rely on volunteers to provide some essential services – like designing our website, serving as faculty at conferences – since funds were scarce. We also had to build a membership base and interest in the young organization. To accomplish these steps, a welcoming, inclusive spirit was adopted. In response to these efforts, a number of trustees gave generously of

their time and money. This set of circumstances and the predilections of key individuals associated with the Institute, created and sustained the appreciative and conflict-free pattern out of an understanding of the above and *fear* that if we drove away any key supporters the viability of Plek would suffer. In Project Four I wrote:

The Institute is a small. It employs four full-time staff and has an annual operating budget of \$750,000. While the Institute has earned small operating surpluses each year and built up equity of \$400,000 since its inception, it is fair to say that its financial state is precarious. It has been a struggle to earn these small profits and they are possible because many people volunteer time to the work of Plek, make donations, and staff salaries are below market rates. The work of the Institute is heavily dependent on the work and thinking of a small cadre of people, especially the board chair, Bob Graber, and me...Bob, who is the retired president of the international division of Merck, the pharmaceutical company, gives generously of his time, provides considerable consulting help to organizations on behalf of Plek (for which we earn income and which Bob provides at no cost to Plek), and makes sizable donations to the Institute every year.

In my research on the active maintenance of this pattern, I discovered a host of factors were at play, factors probably not seen by many board members, and initially not by me. Challenging an established pattern or value may risk one's position and power in the organization and even one's identity. Stacey observes that any potential shift to one's position or standing within a group, generates anxiety and behavior to deal this anxiety (Stacey, 2003a). I uncovered many examples of these protective behaviors. In numerous cases they involved taken-for-granted rhetorical ploys that had the effect of preserving the pattern. In one meeting I asked for a discussion about my leadership strategies. The responses had nothing directly to do with the question and included statements like "let's be realistic...we will always have a distance to travel" and "Plek is very young". During a later meeting I pointed out the appreciative-no conflict pattern and invited reflections. "Don't let go of appreciation" and "I've never noticed Elizabeth, Carol or Jennifer holding back" were among the responses elicited.

I discovered to my chagrin and surprise that my behavior was also feeding this pattern. With insight from my classmates, I came to see that when I became anxious during board



meetings I had a tendency to utter statements or questions that exhibited personal vulnerability. Ironically, at times I would do this in conjunction with efforts to dislodge the appreciative, conflict-free pattern. These statements would be met with responses meant to reassure me. I have come to see my actions as examples of efforts to maintain my position of power, as an influential insider, and that these actions were triggered by anxiety I felt about the future or current state of the organization or my ability to serve as an effective leader. This led me to conclude that understanding and working with the anxiety of those concerned with the well-being of a young nonprofit association was an area worthy of exploration and likely connected, as was my experience, with the appreciative-no conflict pattern. This is an area of inquiry not found in conventional literature.

Ideologies help sustain power relations, contends Stacey. He notes that as people decide how to respond in interactions, ideology constitutes the “evaluative criteria for the choice of actions” (Stacey, 2007, p. 347). In the examples I just covered, one can see this at play. As noted in Project Four, the insider or established group in Plek exhibited an appreciative, conflict averse and action orientation. Such a set of values guided behaviors and any threats to these values were met by actions to reinforce these values and thus protect the insider and power positions of those connected with these values. The strength of these dynamics was demonstrated by the email I received from a board member who was not a member of this insider group and chose not to challenge the dominant ideology. “I am already feeling left behind on board activities and am thinking seriously if I should give way to someone else...” Several months later he resigned.

It is extraordinarily difficult to see and understand the dynamics of inclusion, power, and ideology and the associated rhetorical ploys that accompany them. This was certainly my experience. A number of authors tapped in my research sought to explain this invisibility. Shotter noted that because patterns cannot be “traced back to the intentions of any particular individuals” they seem to have a “given” nature (Shotter, 1993, p. 39). Stacey observes that ideology helps make the current order seen natural (Stacey, 2003a). Shaw accounts for this invisibility by pointing out that attention to patterns of interaction is not part of the accepted management discourse (Shaw, 2002). I can corroborate her conclusion.

In my work on Project Three I consulted a considerable body of organizational literature on the leadership of young start-up organizations. Much of the writing uncovered was based on the life cycle concept of organizational development and hewed to certain assumptions: organizations grow in predictable stages (Chandler, 1962; Churchill & Lewis, 1983; Flamholtz & Randle, 2000; Greiner, 1972; Zahra & Filatotchev, 2004); problems growing beyond start-up are generally created by founders and solutions to these problems require replacing the founder and trustees or supplementing them with staff with the needed skills (Boeker & Wiltbank, 2005; Churchill & Lewis, 1983; Greiner, 1972; Lynall, Golden, & Hillman, 2003). There was nothing of significance I could find on the internal dynamics and processes of young firms, except several papers that decried this lack of attention (Davidsson & Wilkund, 2000; Hanks, Watson, Jansen, & Chandler, 1993; Huse, 2000). I hope my research helps fill this void because the standard literature on small firm growth is incomplete and at times misguided. While the literature rightfully concludes some of the processes, values and routines developed during the start-up phase may no longer be of value to the organization as it seeks to grow, there is no recognition that what Gedajlovic calls the “artifacts engendered by founder-managed governance” are actively sustained in dynamic interactive process involving a group of people. As was the case in Plek and its appreciative, conflict-free-pattern, there can be no assurance that replacing one person, even if it is the founder, will have the desired effect on the unwanted patterns. Yet, this is precisely what the conventional literature suggests. This literature thus takes a stance on power: that it is held in the hands of senior leaders. Their actions create the routines, habits and processes in the small firm. If those leaders chose not to change those that become irrelevant, some other leader should be brought in who will. As was seen in the case of the literature on performance evaluations, this literature also leans strongly towards a systems thinking orientation. Change at the organizational level is dependent upon the behavior of individuals and can be predictably managed and controlled to assure the desired outcome.

#### *A Detour about the Narrative Method*

It took me a long time to find a theme for Project Three and to get underway with the work. This may not be apparent to those reading this thesis since projects may appear to flow from one to the next in a coherent and orderly manner.

One of my faculty supervisors, Patricia Shaw, suggested after reading Project Two that I face something more complex and challenging in my next project. She asked, “Where is your edge?” After a while I simply started to write about conversations at board meetings as this seemed responsive to Patricia’s call to find something more complex. The board obviously involved more people and its work was consequential for Plek. This experience helped me appreciate one of the foundational elements on which the program’s research methodology is based, that of narrative. As I shared early drafts of Project Three with my learning set colleagues and faculty supervisors they began to point out to me the nice, uncritical and superficial nature of the conversations I was reporting. Initially to me these conversations seemed natural, the way they should be. From inviting feedback on an incomplete, unformed project draft and considering this feedback, possible themes began to emerge. These themes included growing beyond the start-up phase in organizations, the engagement of volunteers in this endeavor, and how habits develop in interaction between organizational leaders and board members. These themes suggested bodies of research to examine, like the life cycle literature, and helped me make deeper sense of some of the literature on power and inclusion-exclusion to which I was exposed through the theory of complex response processes. They also shaped my understanding of the dynamics at play and my actions. Additional drafts, my actions and more feedback led to further themes and a deepening exploration of themes. The value of such an approach is acknowledged by March and colleagues when they wrote about capturing the specifics of experience and allowing insights to emerge from the details of the story (March, Sproull, & Tamuz, 1991).

This iterative approach to research also triggered my curiosity about the ideologies and values at play in Plek, an issue that proved central to Project Four, and to a beginning appreciation for reflexivity in research. Mead wrote that by

turning back of the experience of the individual upon himself...which enable the individual to take the attitude of the other toward himself, that the individual is able consciously to adjust himself to the process.

(Mead, 1932a, p. 134)

Such a process is evident in Projects Three and Four: seeing myself in interaction with trustees; understanding more fully their reactions to my actions and the patterns we jointly created; and modifying my choices.

### *Exercising Newly “Found” Power*

Modifying choices became a theme in Project Four, which dealt with the paradox of values and leading volunteers. I came to realize that the appreciative and conflict-free value was blocking the expression of difference that naturally emerges in the work of organizations. As a leader of a nonprofit association I came to see I had more power than previously appreciated and that the literature on nonprofit associations suggested. Such realizations opened up more options for my actions in everyday interactions with trustees.

Joas, in *The Genesis of Values*, wrote that values are chosen freely, provide meaning, inspire us to act in ways that contribute to the greater good of society, and develop through interaction with others (Joas, 2000). Mead, whose work informed Joas, commented on the tendency of people to idealize these values in imagining a future that is whole, free from conflict, and which people together see as possible (Mead, 1932b). Mead referred to these idealizations as cult values and noted that because of what they inspire they are a precious part of human existence. Dewey was of a like mind when he wrote of our “idealizing imagination” and how they frame our ends (Dewey, 1934, p. 38).

Paradoxically, if cult values are taken up in a way that does not allow for variation and judgment given the particular, unique circumstances people face in action, they become restrictive and limiting and exclude all who do not conform. The result Mead asserts is a cult. Such an orientation to values, notes Griffin, presents a false sense of reality, a life of harmony free of difference (Griffin, 2002). Such a view blinds us to the obstacles and conflicts that are part of normal human interaction. Mead observes that in most circumstances cult values are applied in ways that allow people to interpret them in the particular, contingent circumstances they face. He calls this process functionalization and the values functional values. When cult values become functional values, conflict inevitably emerges because of individual interpretations and understandings.

In the Plek narrative one can see instances of the appreciative, conflict-free value being taken up in a cult like way. Remember the resignation of the trustee who felt his reflective orientation did not mesh with the appreciative, action orientation of other trustees. Remember the observation the chair of the board, Bob Graber, made during a board meeting that involved some conflict? “Are we really saying we want to be more open? Are we agreeing to a standard of greater openness? I must say that my pattern has been otherwise; assuming that this is what was desired.”

One can also find examples of the functionalization of values and the emergence of conflict from this process, and the possibility of a change in a value. Project Four included an account of one trustee challenging another, asking in a challenging way, “Have I been wasting my time?” during a board meeting conversation about an action project.

Other instances where conflict emerged in the work of Plek stemmed from the inherently paradoxical nature of values in organizations. Positive Deviance (PD) was embraced as a process to bring out diversity in the work Plek did with hospitals in the MRSA project while the PD process was simultaneously being protected from “contamination” by trustees who were different. This example highlights the fact that people in organizations are guided by multiple values. The existence of multiple values means that there will inevitably be conflicts among values. The above illustrations demonstrate this point: the appreciative, conflict-free value conflicting with the value of diversity.

Thus we see that conflict naturally emerges in the normal work of a nonprofit association because of the functionalization of values, the inherent incompatibility of different values, and the paradoxical nature of values. How these conflicts are handled thus becomes an important issue for a nonprofit association. Are the conflicts “allowed” expression, are they explored and given voice, or are they denied, ignored or dampened? While one can find in my research narratives examples of both orientations, it seemed that the dominance of the appreciative-no conflict value was blocking the expression and exploration of many differences.

As I look back over the history of Plek and my research narratives, I have a sense that as the organization developed and moved from a primary concentration on educating people

about complexity science to a dual focus on educating people and addressing complex issues, more conflicts came into play. This observation is in line with the conclusion drawn by a fellow doctoral student who, in writing about values in nongovernmental international development organizations, concluded that:

...far from always being a unifying experience, working with values with colleagues can be an enormous cause of conflict and dissonance, *particularly when working situations are complicated* (italics added).

(Mowles, 2007, p. 95)

Such a conclusion was also recognized by Frumkin, one of the primary writers on nonprofit organizations and values, when he observed:

...one of the core tasks of nonprofit leaders is aligning and interpreting a broad and complex set of values in the context of social and community problems that *require action* (italics added).

(Frumkin, 2002, p. 103)

As my research progressed and I became aware of different ways of thinking about values, power, patterns of interacting, and how all are actively maintained in local, everyday conversations, I gradually changed my view of my role as a leader. I shifted from primarily seeing my job as a gentle, careful facilitator of the whole organization (the “designer” role described in Project One) to one more centered on routine conversational practices that allowed for conflict to be surfaced and explored, drew out differences and examined paradoxes, and avoided personal expressions that helped sustain stuck patterns. This shift in my understanding of the role of the nonprofit association leader stemmed from several insights gained in my research.

I came to recognize how organizational values, an example of what Stacey calls population wide patterns in human organizations, are created, sustained and potentially changed through routine, ordinary conversations, what he calls micro or local interactions (Stacey, 2007). This recognition came very close to home as I discovered how my uncritical, taken-for-granted behavior was helping sustain the appreciative, conflict-free pattern I saw as limiting. As first described in Project Two, I recognized how such

repetitive patterns of interacting were detrimental in organizations that must change and innovate to survive and thrive. Complexity scientists note that systems that are adaptable exhibit far-from-equilibrium or edge of chaos conditions. With these dynamics at play, small instabilities or differences may ripple through the system and lead to new patterns of organization (Goldberger, 1997; Kauffman, 1995; Kelso, 1995; Nicolis & Prigogine, 1989; Prigogine, 1996; Prigogine & Stengers, 1984). Stacey, Shaw and Streatfield contend that such dynamics exist in creative, free-flowing conversations (Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2003a; Streatfield, 2001).

The recognition that came last to me had to do with power. Earlier in this synopsis I wrote of how I followed the conventional guidance on leading volunteers found in the management literature. Such guidance presumed the nonprofit association leader was highly dependent upon volunteers to accomplish the work of the organization. Such leaders were presumed to be in a relatively powerless position. My examination of this mainstream literature in light of the scholarship of Mead and Dewey on values and my experience led me to a very different conclusion.

As noted above, there is tendency in people to idealize a perfect future free of difficulties and hardships. When people come together with others around some preferred future and its associated values they experience an “enlarged sense of self” and, hence, new beliefs about what is possible (Dewey, 1934; Griffin, 2002; Mead, 1932b; Stacey, 2007). Writing this brought to mind a comment made by Bob at one of our board meetings. In a conversation about early signs of progress in our PD MRSA work with hospitals, he pointed out that we should be thinking of how to scale up the effort. “After all,” he asked, “aren’t there 6,000 hospitals in the U.S.?”

This penchant for volunteers to rally around an idealized future and thus experience Dewey’s “enlarged sense of self” *creates a dependency* among the volunteers on me because of my position as a senior executive. This role enables the expression of their values and the possibility of attaining the future which brought them together and which is part of their identity. Without me there is a chance the organization would fail. Without my support key initiatives were unlikely to advance. Evidence for this conclusion comes from the appreciative, reassuring comments board members voiced in response to the signals of vulnerability and questions about my leadership I delivered at several board

meetings. “You are doing a fabulous job” and “you’re one of the finest CEOs I know” were, I believe, meant to affirm my membership (power) with them in the established group, as exemplified in my role as a president of Plek. If I left Plek, the people who felt strongly about its work and values might be left without an organizational vehicle that represented their values and the possibility of realizing the better future they imagined and hoped to create. Thus, quite a number of trustees were inclined in interaction with me to express their appreciation and avoid conflict.

*They Were Feeling Dependent upon Me as I Was Feeling Dependent upon Them, While in Fact We Were Inextricably Interdependent*

As my understanding and insight into these factors – interdependency, values emerging, being sustained and changed through everyday interactions, the necessary and inherently conflictual process surrounding values, the genesis of the appreciative and conflict-free pattern, and the serious risk to organizational viability posed by stuck patterns of interaction – grew over the course of this research, I noticed the anxiety I experienced in “board room” interactions with trustees gradually subsided. Achieving what Elias would term greater detachment, enabled me to make different in-the-moment choices and not simply act in habitual, taken-for-granted ways. In some sense, the significant anxiety I experienced previously was disabling. Now I feel more equipped to understand and work with the anxiety inherent in organizational life. I have come to believe that how nonprofit association executives work with anxiety is a significant contributor to their leadership effectiveness.

When I probed the literature for insights into the issue of anxiety and leadership in nonprofit associations, nothing was uncovered. Everything that was found spoke of the nonprofit leader’s need to reduce and ameliorate conflict and differences among volunteers and insure that organizational values were shared (Hall, 1990; Knoke & Prensky, 2006; Mason, 1996; Salamon, 2003; Young, 1987). Stated differently, the leader’s work entailed reducing anxiety among volunteers. The omission of any treatment of the role of a leader’s anxiety probably helps shield this issue from recognition as a legitimate matter that bears on the management of nonprofit associations.



It should be emphasized too that a leader's anxiety is not simply the result of internal processes, disconnected from the relationships and organizational dynamics in which he or she is enmeshed. Smith and Stevens explored this matter in their research on the neurochemical correlates of behavior and the influence of anxiety on norms. They wrote of the "hard-wired" ability of a child to detect parental distress and disapproval. With this detection comes the associated anxiety experienced by the parent. Ignoring these feelings and the actions required to ameliorate them deprives the child of the "physiologic benefits – opioid and arousal effects – triggered by their own attachment behavior" (Smith & Stevens, 2002, p. 119). This physiologic steering process naturally guides behavior towards patterns deemed acceptable in a family. This dynamic process stays with us throughout life according to these authors. Comfort, calmness and acceptance come with compliance with norms; distress and isolation with noncompliance. Both arise socially through interaction. One's "own comfort cannot be managed apart from the comfort of those around them" (Smith & Stevens, 2002, p. 123).

In terms of Projects Three and Four, one can find evidence for the pattern Smith and Stevens develop. My expressions of distress – statements about vulnerability – were sensed by board members and met by some with what Smith terms attachment behavior, efforts to calm and reassure. Such actions not only relieve my anxiety but the anxiety felt by the trustees. Elizabeth's emotional remarks during the November board meeting likely led to an increase in felt anxiety by board members. One trustee, the target of her anger, remarked, "I am sorry....I'll be more attentive." I certainly sensed Elizabeth's emotions and felt anxious myself, but decided not to try to calm the waters and reassure her. Smith adds that dependency on attachment diminishes with cognitive and intellectual development. *It is my sense that participation in this doctoral program has increased my ability to understand the dynamics at play in my organization, reducing my level of anxiety, and hence opening up more possible responses in my interactions with others, going beyond those driven by anxiety and a desire for comfort. This, it seems to me is a benefit of the kind of reflexivity Mead describes and Smith connects with cognitive development.*

I began to notice that beginning in Project Four I was evaluating more options for interacting in-the-moment, and sometimes taking action and risks more spontaneously. There was a perceptible move away from a reliance on planned interventions such as my

talk at the beginning of one board meeting about the limits of the appreciative, conflict-free pattern and an invitation to reflect on my observations. Such a strategy does not recognize the social nature of values, how they emerge from the ongoing local interaction and conversation. Such a strategy stems from a belief that values are primarily a product of rational intention and can be managed.

With awareness that shifts in power and conflictual conversations hold the potential for spurring more creative, free-flowing conversation, and that the *“action” is in everyday interactions*, I began to take some new actions, some of which are recounted in Project Four and some as this synopsis was being written. For example, I:

- consciously have not intervened to deflect or temper conflicts that emerged in board meeting conversations;
- avoided actions that in the past sustained the appreciative, conflict-free value;
- called for consideration of actions different from those proposed by powerful, forceful trustees; and
- worked to consider alternatives before acting in an unreflective, uncritical and habitual manner on issues involving trustees.

Recently I caught myself before taking an action in a taken-for-granted way with one of my board members. Along with several Plek colleagues, I am co-editing a book on complexity and nursing. The author of one of the book chapters is Bill Patch, a member of the Plek board and an internationally respected nursing scholar. He is well-known for developing a model for clinical decision making. We asked Bill to craft a chapter for the book because of his interest in complexity science and because we believed he could develop his model further to reflect complexity concepts. What we received was a draft chapter in which he retrofitted his model around a rather superficial understanding of complexity science. I shared some feedback with Bill in a phone call and in writing, providing some suggestions on how his model could be developed. What came back was the same model with a few more references to complexity. In exploring what to do about this situation and whether we could even include his work in the book, my two co-editors suggested that it would probably be wise for them to take up this matter with Bill because if I did it might damage my relationship with a board member. Initially this seemed a wise way to proceed. The next morning I realized that I should continue to work with Bill

and adopt a clearer stance with him. It is quite conceivable that had my co-editors' offer come earlier in my doctoral studies, I would have accepted it without examining its limitations and exploring other options.

In another instance, during a meeting of the nominating committee, which is responsible for recommending new people for open trustee positions, I suggested we add those who accept the offer to join the board in time for them to attend a three-day board meeting set for the fall. Elizabeth Gardener, who has a strong voice on the Plek board and who chairs this committee, stated she felt these new people would interfere with open conversation at this important meeting so we should hold off adding them to the board. If past patterns had held, the conversation would probably have ended there. I interjected and suggested that we seriously explore the alternative I had suggested since this would provide new trustees with a significant experience with other trustees early in their tenure to help them better fulfill their roles on the board. I acknowledged that some of the people we did not know well and it would be hard to predict the impact they would have on the board meeting, but felt the risk nevertheless was worth taking.

While recognizing that these and other actions – which represent shifts in power, challenges to existing values, and a person's standing in the organization – will sometimes meet unexpected and troubling responses, I am coming to see this as an acceptable risk, in service of the larger goal of creating an organization more capable of change and growth. I also feel better prepared to work with what emerges and learn from the actions, in large measure because of the research process employed in this program. This preparation comes in large measure from my growing appreciation that the essence of organization is common, everyday, micro interactions, which entail conflict, difference and uncertain outcomes. The possibility for creating different dynamics at the organization level, or what Stacey calls global patterns, can only occur if different patterns emerge from local level, everyday conversations and actions. Elias captured the essence of this point in quotations cited in my projects and repeated here because of their insightfulness.

...the basic tissue resulting from many single plans and actions of man can give rise to change and patterns that no individual person has planned or created. From the interdependence of people arises an order sui generis, an order more

compelling and stronger than the will and reason of the individual people composing it.

(Elias, 1998, p. 150)

From plans arising, yet unplanned  
By purpose moved, yet purposeless.

(Elias, 1991, p. 64)

*In the Context of the Conventional Literature on Power and Values*

The orientation explored in the preceding paragraph is consistent with the view of power explored in several projects. Evidence for the beliefs that power is an aspect of all human relating and ever dynamic, is inextricably interwoven with ideology and membership in groups (inclusion and exclusion), and that change in organizations is dependent upon changes in power relationships among participants in the organization was seen in multiple places in the Plek narrative. This view is not found in the literature on nonprofit associations and management of volunteers. All one finds are cautions to leaders to narrow power differences to maintain involvement of volunteers and to avoid and minimize conflict. Adoption of such a strategy may lead, like in the case of Plek, to what Stacey and Griffin term the loss of complexity in organizational interactions, a pattern they state is “inappropriate for dealing with the fluidity of ordinary, everyday life” (Stacey & Griffin, 2005, p. 7).

The topic of power is similarly given very little attention in the general management literature on organizations (Finkelstein, 1992). Finkelstein, however, does deal with the topic and observes that power accrues to managers “who can cope with uncertainty” (Finkelstein, 1992, p. 508). He thus views power from a relational perspective and makes the connection with anxiety (coping with uncertainty). A similar story emerges from a look at the general literature on power. In an extensive historical and analytical review, Clegg, in his book *Frameworks of Power*, states that most modern views of power cling to the agency model proffered by Hobbes, Dahl and Locke: power is held by individuals (sovereigns) and exercised in a mechanistic manner to compel compliance of the less powerful with the preferences of the more powerful (Clegg, 1989). Clegg puts it this way:

It was to be the metaphorically mechanical, modernist spirit that was appropriated by some of the most successful mid-twentieth writers on power. For those texts power was to be conceived in positivist terms as something directly observable and measurable. The roots of such a metaphor reach back to the model of classical mechanics.

(Clegg, 1989, p. 4)

Clegg challenges this perspective and sees power from more of an Eliasian perspective: power should be viewed as a concept which can only be understood relationally. He acknowledges the work of Foucault as central in breaking the hold of the mechanistic and sovereign perspectives on power. Foucault saw power as a shifting network of alliances, methods and tools which achieve effective control over others and which emerges and is exercised in a social process (Foucault, 1977; Foucault, 1984). He wrote of power stemming from “*within* the social body, rather than *from above it*” (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). The emphasis was on achieving control and order through what he termed disciplinary power (Foucault, 1979). He viewed power as having a force which is expressed through a system “whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in state apparatus, in the formulation of law, in the various social hegemonies” (Foucault, 1984, p. 92). There are some similarities in Foucault’s thinking on power with the views of Elias. They challenge the sovereign, mechanistic perspective. They both propose that power emerges through networks and is dynamic. Elias would break from the Foucault perspective that power is a force or system that primarily operates to achieve control and argue that it is not some external force but rather a feature of everyday human interactions that both constrains and enables human behavior. Such a position is more in line with the experiences explored in my research.

When one looks at the management literature on nonprofit organizations, volunteers, and values, a picture similar to the one on power in nonprofit associations comes into view. To begin with, there is very little written, and much of what is written seems underdeveloped and at times incongruent with the organizational experiences reported here. Values are seen only in a positive light. They attract volunteers, guide and help coordinate behavior, sustain participation. From this perspective, the role of managers is basically to assure consistency among values and minimize conflict about values. Conflict and difference are viewed as problematic because they could drive volunteers

away from the organization. While there is support for this positive perspective from the alternative literature on values by Mead, Elias, Stacey explored in Project Four, a vital limitation became evident in my research – that the inherently paradoxical nature of values in organizations was not recognized. Such lack of recognition led to a truncated view of the role of managers. Certainly the role of managers involves appreciating the role, work and values of volunteers. Paradoxically, it must also involve and explore the inevitable conflicts and differences that emerge as values are employed in the work of the organization. Only then can people interact in a complex manner suitable for changing times.

When I expanded my search of the organizational literature on values beyond nonprofit organizations, the picture changed little. I did, however, find a couple voices arguing for a more paradoxical perspective. Quinn, in developing a competing, paradoxical framework on values, argued for a “conflictual, process-oriented” view of organizations (Quinn & Rohrbaugh; 1983, p. 375). Buenger, using this framework, noted that successful organizations satisfy “competing, even contradictory criteria” and that sensible managers should adopt this understanding (Buenger et al., 1996, p. 560).

Prior to concluding this synopsis with a summary of my findings and contributions, I will turn to a more in-depth examination of the research methods employed in my projects and place these methods in context of other qualitative research approaches.

### *Elaborating on the Research Methodology and Locating It within the Field of Qualitative Research*

*Richness has power but we are not powerless to evoke it.*

(Weick, 2007, p. 14)

When I entered the doctoral program my knowledge of qualitative research was limited. My understanding of research methods changed significantly over the course of my project work, as did my thinking about research methods appropriate for my developing line of inquiry. Allowing a research design to emerge in the process of research as opposed to selecting a methodology in advance is viewed as an appropriate strategy for

qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a). Such a strategy, called emergent design, recognizes the uncertainties in research projects (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A framework for understanding qualitative research I found helpful was developed by Crabtree and Miller (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). They organize qualitative research around three paradigms: materialistic inquiry; constructivist inquiry; and critical/ecological inquiry. The aim of materialistic inquiry, also referred to as positivism, is ultimate truth and its methods are those of the standard scientific linear approach: define the research problem; review literature; form hypotheses; design and conduct research; analyze data; form conclusions and revise hypotheses. Its purpose is to “help humans maintain physical life, our labor, our technology” (Miller & Crabtree, 1999, p. 8). The positivist scientific paradigm has been demonstrated to be of value in the natural sciences and has been adopted in some social sciences as the ultimate model for organizational science. Susman and Everet observe that this paradigm “produces a knowledge that may only inadvertently serve and sometimes undermine the values of organizational members” (Susman & Evered, 1978, p. 583). Evaluation criteria associated with this paradigm include internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The second paradigm, constructivist inquiry, seeks knowledge that enables humans to “maintain cultural life, symbolic communication, and meaning” (Miller & Crabtree, 1999, p. 9). Its methods involve iterative cycles of ongoing discovery and interpretation, an acknowledgement the research must be grounded in context, and an appreciation that the researcher affects and is affected by the inquiry. Constructivist inquiry does not seek ultimate truth but rather understanding within context.

Critical/ecological inquiry, the third paradigm, seeks to “help humans maintain social life, focuses on the reality of domination, distribution of power, associated inequalities, and ecological context and issues of sustainability” (Miller & Crabtree, 1999, p. 10). Crabtree and Miller note that this method of inquiry is best suited for the examination and understanding of systems. Within this paradigm, they locate participatory inquiry and the related methods of cooperative inquiry, participatory action research, and action science. All three methods share an emphasis on action and reform rather than “description or meaning” and employ an “iterative cycle of inquiry” involving defining a problem, analyzing it, and developing a solution (Thesen & Kuzel, 1999). Originally introduced in

1946 by Kurt Lewin, action research, in an often quoted definition, “contributes both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and the goals of social science by joint collaboration...” (Rapoport, 1970, p. 499). To these goals Kemmis and McTaggart add the strengthening of the collective capacity of people to improve their lives and solve problems in organizations (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Another method not mentioned by Crabtree and Miller that fits within this third paradigm is appreciative inquiry. As expressed by the developers of this method, Cooperrider and Srivastva, the goals of appreciative inquiry are to:

discover, describe, and explain those social innovations, however small, which serve to give "life" to the system and activate members' competencies and energies as more fully functioning participants in the formation and transformation of organizational realities.

(Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p. 161)

I find some value in this method because it recognizes that interactions and patterns of interactions are what create the organization, its successes and innovations. However, like the conventional literature on values in nonprofit associations which only recognizes the positive value of value, I find this orientation limiting because of its single focus on the positive aspects of life in organizations. By privileging this view it hides the ever-present difficulties and paradoxes inherent in organizational work and the value of conflict and difference, as did the appreciative, no-conflict pattern and value in Plek.

Susman and Evered claim that evaluation criteria of positivist science are incompatible with action research. To them, the “perceived functionality of chosen actions to produce desirable consequences for an organization” is what counts (Susman & Evered, 1978, p. 601). Such a view is responsive to the call in the qualitative research community for “serious rethinking of...*validity, generalizability, and reliability*” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a, p. 19).

The orientation of participatory action research – improve an organization’s collective capacity, solve problems, contribute to social science – fit well with my early research interests for several reasons. One, the initial orientation of my research had to do with improving my ability to lead, and thus improve the Institute I serve; the action research



purpose of improving the system and developing collective capacity. Second, when I began my doctoral studies I saw organizations and leaders at two distinct and separate levels, with the leader acting intentionally to improve the whole organization; the cyclical process of diagnosing, planning, acting, evaluating and learning (Susman & Evered, 1978). Third, through my research I hoped to contribute to organizational theory; the participatory action research goal of advancing social science.

As I moved from Project One to Project Two, I began to question the dualism assumed in the participatory action research paradigm. I began to wonder if organizations are best understood as systems, and to gradually turn my attention to local interactions and patterns. This gave me a glimpse into one of the fundamental premises of complex responsive processes theory: that the individual and social are not separate levels but aspects of one process. Instead of levels, individuals and systems (organizations), Stacey and Griffin wrote in their volume on research:

In the human process terms...there are no forces over and above individuals. All we have are vast numbers of continually iterated interactions...and these are local in the sense that each of us can only interact with a limited number of others...

(Stacey & Griffin, 2005, p. 18)

I began to see this dynamic in my study of Plek Institute and in my experience within the doctoral program. From routine, everyday interactions between staff and board members and between fellow students and faculty widespread patterns were created, sustained and sometimes changed. In turn, and simultaneously, these patterns shaped the behavior and interactions of the participants. These insights led me to examine other research traditions and methods that did not make the conventional distinction between the individual and the social and which focused on the details of commonplace human interaction. A review of qualitative research traditions contained in *Doing Qualitative Research* made it clear that established, accepted methods hold firmly to the individual-social dualism (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). For example, research methods such as life history, ethology relate most directly to individuals. Ethnomethodology, grounded theory, ethnography deal with social and cultural life. According to Denzin and Lincoln, the highly respected editors of the recently published third edition of *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, the

general direction of qualitative research is towards the “study of the social world from the perspective of the interacting individual” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, p. xvi).

A methodology that does not hold to this dualism is complex responsive processes.

From the perspective of complex responsive processes, the appropriate method for understanding, for researching into organizations, is itself complex responsive processes. Research itself is also complex responsive processes and the research method becomes a reflection on ordinary everyday experiences.

(Stacey & Griffin, 2005, p. 22-23)

Here we see the method is not about changing wholes, the intent of participatory inquiry, but rather making sense of routine conversation and interaction. It is also about the larger, widespread patterns that stem from local interaction. Researching these local interactions, contend Stacey and Griffin, is best done from the inside, meaning that the researcher, engaged in the real work of an organization, reflects on his or her everyday, commonplace interactions with others (Stacey & Griffin, 2005). Such research requires that the details of experience be captured and serve as the basis for interpretation and sense-making. This brings narrative into the research process. In a classic article, “Learning from samples of one or fewer”, March, Sproull and Tamuz explore the importance of learning from unique historical events in organizations and provide guidance on how to do so (March, Sproull, & Tamuz, 1991). They write of the need to begin by capturing the richness and detail of the experience without shaping it.

Great organizational histories, like great novels, are written, not by first constructing interpretations of events and then filling in the details, but by first identifying the details and allowing interpretations to emerge from them.

(March, Sproull, & Tamuz, 1991, p. 8)

Weick echoes this and speaks of evoking and coaxing into view the richness of an experience by going to the “scene of the accident” and restoring the “past to its own present with all its incoherence, complications and ‘might have beens’” (Weick, 2007, pp. 16-17). Others accept the value of narrative as a research method because it is the best way to represent life and encourage exploration of experience (MacIntyre, 1981).

Stacey and Griffin make clear how the complex responsive process methodology is reflexive in the individual and social sense. The researcher works to examine his or her life experience and how this affects the sense the researcher is making of the experience under study while also “making explicit the way of thinking that he or she is reflecting in the construction of the story” (Stacey & Griffin, 2005, p. 23). On the social dimension, the researcher is required to relate his or her ways of thinking to the relevant traditions of thought that develop socially over time in a community or society. Such a reflexive approach is recognized by Alvesson in his call for an appreciation by researchers that they are enmeshed in a social world. This requires both self-examination and recognition that human affairs can best be understood by bringing in multiple perspectives (Alvesson, 2003).

The research is also undertaken within a community of researchers, recognizing the fact that traditions of thought develop in a social, participatory way. I have benefited from this community approach to research. Fellow students and faculty helped me uncover my habitual patterns of interacting in the research community and see similar patterns in my research narrative that were not apparent to me. March calls this discovering more aspects of experience by attending to the views of multiple observers. “Because different individuals ...experience historical events differently, they learn different lessons from the same experience” (March, Sproull, & Tamuz, 1991, p. 3).

By spending time with fellow students and faculty in small and large groups and devoting time to making sense of the interactions in these groups, I have gained a deeper feel for how patterns emerge and change. This experience helped me connect in a different way with research in my organization and deal with the shift in orientation from the whole to micro-interactions.

My student colleagues and faculty pointed me to new literature. They challenged me to go deeper with my critical appraisal of the literature. My review of research and themes pursued by research colleagues has led to unexpected (emergent) new directions and literature relevant to my research. Bringing to bear a variety of interpretations and theories protects, as Weick puts it, “against hubris” (Weick, 2007, p. 16). This kind of participation and the iterative nature of the research (writing multiple drafts of project

papers for comment by other researchers and faculty) have stimulated new insights into my research narrative, more appreciation for the value of multiple viewpoints and an understanding of how this deepens the inquiry process. A similar social process occurs, if you will, within the researcher as he or she relates in an ongoing way with the narrative, with literature pursued as themes emerge in the research, and with multiple drafts of the narrative. It is fair to say that my research is no different from my reflective practice. Such an intense process involving multiple participants is called for both as a means of dealing with the variability in interpretation of human events and for pulling “together scraps of information about an underlying reality that cumulate much the way various elements of a portrait cumulate to provide information about the subject” (March, Sproull, & Tamuz, 1991, p. 8). Dewey would appreciate the ongoing, iterative and deepening nature of this inquiry. In *Experience and Nature* he wrote of initial reflections of nature becoming the object of further inquiry, and how this process continues, constantly revealing more of the complexity of life.

The emergent nature of this research is evident in my experience with Project Four. What was most striking about Project Four from a methodological perspective was the radical change in direction that occurred midstream. My initial drafts dealt primarily with the development of the PD MRSA effort, specifically around the negotiations with the VA for the support of PD efforts in some of the agency’s hospitals. In this context themes of power and conflict were examined. After circulating one of these drafts, a learning set classmate asked about the conflicts and paradoxes involved in leading volunteers and added that she saw evidence of my increasing willingness and ability to deal with conflict. Previously my faculty supervisor had emailed his reflections, which were included in the Project Four account, about the evangelic, uncritical adoption of PD. Further stimulated by a conversation about a later draft of my project at a learning set meeting, I began to sense the shape of an altered project that dealt with leading a nonprofit organization dependent on volunteers and the paradoxical nature of values. A *very different* and unexpected project soon emerged, new literature on nonprofit organizations, values and volunteers was tapped and undoubtedly my thinking and behavior was affected. As this was underway, my faculty advisor weighed in with the observation that it was “interesting in that this would mean that the original narrative will have largely disappeared.”

How should such research be evaluated? Denzin and Lincoln suggest that credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability replace the conventional criteria of validity, reliability and objectivity in evaluating qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility refers to whether the findings from the research inquiry adequately represent the multiple constructed realities of an experience as determined by those involved. Transferability is a determination made by someone seeking to make use of findings from the research on an issue or in a context with which they are familiar. It assumes that the researcher cannot make such judgments since they do not possess this local knowledge. Dependability differs from reliability in that the assumptions of stability and predictability are not maintained and requires the researcher to account for instability and factors associated with the change process. Confirmability asks whether the data, the narrative can be reasonably be interpreted by others in a manner similar to interpretations offered by the researcher. Such a move supplants concentration on the objectivity of the researcher.

I have had some experience with these replacement criteria. On multiple occasions, I shared drafts of project papers with Plek staff, Plek trustees and with DMan faculty and colleagues and made several presentations at board meetings and Plek conferences. As the research progressed, people told me that they were able to relate to the narratives and the sense I made of them. For example, in one board meeting covered in Project Three in which I recounted my impressions about patterns of interaction, one trustee commented, "I've felt the pattern you described." This speaks to the criteria of confirmability and credibility. Several of these same individuals also informed me that they could foresee using some of my findings in their organizational work, for instance in employee performance evaluations, the topic of Project Two. This type of feedback begins to touch on the issue of transferability and the overarching goal of qualitative research, that of trustworthiness. "How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290)? Dewey asks whether reflections on experience

...end in conclusions which, when referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful? Does it yield enrichment and increase the power of ordinary

things which the results of physical sciences afford when applied to everyday affairs?

(Dewey, 1958, p. 7)

I have found a complex responsive process approach to research very appropriate and meaningful in my doctoral studies and central to my efforts to “coax” richness “into view” (Weick, 2007, p. 14) and “elaborate experience by discovering more aspects of experience, more interpretations, and more preferences by which to evaluate experience” (March, Sproull, & Tamuz, 1991, p. 1).

Personal experience has made me aware of some limitations and dilemmas associated with a complex responsive processes approach to research. For one, it is not widely known. Evidence of this is the fact that it is not referenced in the current edition of the highly regarded *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. This has several consequences. It has not been subjected to significant critical examination, so its weaknesses have not yet been exposed. It presents a significant challenge to conventional mainstream organizational theory and research methods and thus research following its precepts and methods may be dismissed for lack of understanding or denigrated because it challenges the power position of mainstream authorities and literature.

The second challenge relates to ethics. As I noted above, I was fairly free in sharing drafts and final versions of my projects with Plek staff and board members, including some who were not always portrayed in a positive light. In advance of this and to approach my research in an ethical manner, I informed those I worked with closely that: I was undertaking this course of study and it involved writing about my experiences in Plek; it would not always be possible to identify in advance all the experiences I would be documenting and exploring; and that I would be recounting only my sense of these experiences and not attributing any views to them. In addition, I stated, that when the final thesis was prepared, all personal and organizational names would be changed to help insure confidentiality. In all cases, after this disclosure, those in the Plek community I approached gave this work and my approach their encouragement. In two instances, after sharing a final version of a project, a Plek employee and board member expressed dismay at what had been written and one was quite upset with me. I feel badly about the distress my writing caused and wonder about my judgment in so openly sharing my work. Yet,

there is the chance that these individuals may have gained some sense for the understanding I made of the experiences in which they were involved and how these understanding affected my behavior. Perhaps this will over time strengthen our ability to work together and perhaps not.

### *Closing Thoughts and a Summary of My Contributions*

In this synopsis I have shown the significance of the nonprofit sector in society and thus the importance of the leadership of these organizations. In this synopsis and the projects comprising this thesis, I have demonstrated that research on the organization and management of nonprofit organizations and nonprofit associations is quite limited, somewhat superficial and generally assumes nonprofit organizations are just like other organizations. Additionally, I pointed to a major gap in this scholarship: the lack of significant inquiry into the internal dynamics of nonprofits.

What is written about the themes explored in this thesis – values, power, and the leadership of volunteers in nonprofit associations – stresses:

- the importance of allowing volunteers to express their values;
- the static nature of values and the fact that they are “held” at the individual and organizational levels;
- the dangers of allowing conflict around values to emerge and need for nonprofit executives to minimize and carefully manage such conflicts and more generally to assure that values are shared and aligned;
- the need for genuine participation by volunteers in organizational decision-making achieved by adopting a democratic and partnership management orientation; and,
- the value of recognizing and appreciating the contributions of volunteers.

Such guidance is all in the service of attracting and sustaining the commitment, engagement, and contributions of volunteers and based on an implicit assumption that *nonprofit associations and their leaders are very dependent on volunteers, and hence have little power.*

Research into my own experience in a nonprofit association and through an extensive assessment of conventional and alternative literature led me to conclude that what is written about the management of nonprofit associations is *incomplete, at times misleading, and sometimes incorrect*, and if fully embraced by leaders and volunteers would handicap the ability of many organizations to effectively face change. My contributions to the organizational literature and to executives who care about nonprofit associations involve a significant challenge to the current mainstream literature and the addition to the literature of new insights about nonprofit association leadership and dynamics. Such contributions answer the call by America's leading authority on nonprofits for new thinking and fresh scholarship.

These contributions deal with interdependence, power, values, conflict, and anxiety.

Through my experience I have demonstrated there is a deep *interdependence* between volunteers and nonprofit association leaders. This interdependence stems from the fact that the organization depends on the contributions of time and resources from volunteers and that the volunteers depend on association executives and the organization for the opportunity to express their values and the possibility of moving towards an imagined and idealized future. The conventional literature does not recognize this interdependency. Recognition of this interdependency enables nonprofit association leaders to realize and exercise more *power* than the nonprofit literature would allow.

Because this interdependency is not recognized and because of the resource related circumstances faced by many nonprofit associations, I have identified a tendency in these organizations, including Plek Institute, to develop a value and pattern of interacting I characterized as *appreciative and conflict-free*. Through examples from Plek, both with volunteers and staff, and references to alternative literature associated with complexity science and complex responsive processes theory, I have shown how such repetitive, habitual patterns hinder creative, free-flowing conversation and hence the ability of an organization to adapt to changing conditions and surprises. Such patterns are likely to limit the expression and critical examination of *conflicts* and differences that are inevitably generated throughout the course of an organization's work. These conflicts emerge from *functionalization* of values, from inherent *incompatibilities* among different values, and from the *paradoxical nature* of all values. If, as the conventional literature emphasizes, such differences are viewed as detrimental to the health of the organization,



and if values are only seen in a positive light, and their paradoxical nature not recognized, nonprofit association executives will see their responsibility as resolving, quelling or deflecting conflicts.

The generation of the appreciative and conflict-free value and pattern in Plek point to an additional finding and difference from the mainstream literature. In Plek it was shown this value was created and sustained through *interactions* within the organization. It was an unplanned, emergent outcome of routine conversations and, as such, was dynamic and a function of interaction; not static and fixed and held at either the individual or organizational level. Given its dynamic nature, it also and always held the potential for being both sustained and changed. Evidence of this was seen in the Plek narrative. This all suggests that values cannot simply be articulated and managed in a rational, planned manner by nonprofit association managers.

Since so little has been written about the internal dynamics of nonprofit associations, the extent of the appreciative, conflict-free pattern is not known. Because this pattern can be so limiting, I believe additional research on this topic is warranted.

Conflict inevitably involves *anxiety*. My research suggests that for insights into the existence and nature of conflicts, and thus the ability to influence unhealthy habitual patterns, nonprofit association leaders should be attuned to and scholars should explore the topic of anxiety. Feelings of anxiety may signal a shift in power or interacting, challenge to a value or threat to an individual's identity or position of power in an organization or group – all potential opportunities for change and discovery. Anxiety may also signal the likelihood in some people that taken-for-granted attachment behavior will be employed to retreat from the tension and uncertainty associated with change. For me, awareness of these factors along with the knowledge that one can neither know with certainty the responses one's actions will trigger, nor how one will react to these responses, has generally decreased the level of anxiety I experience in my work with the Plek board volunteers. This is what Stacey points to when he wrote, "I believe that thinking in this way is itself a way of living with the anxiety of not knowing" (Stacey, 2007, p. 448). I did not uncover any writing on the topic of leadership anxiety in the nonprofit association management literature. As such, I believe this matter also warrants more attention and research.

This way of viewing organizational dynamics plus my new understanding of power relationships with volunteers have enabled me to generate and take new actions, and avoid behavior that reinforces unhealthy repetitive patterns of interaction. These actions are focused on normal, everyday conversations as I have come to understand that organization-wide patterns stem from regular conversations and changes in these conversations always hold the potential for changing organization-wide patterns.

Emblematic of a potentially significant new pattern of interacting explored in this research and affected by this research involves the relationship in Plek (and undoubtedly other nonprofit associations) between the chairperson of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer. In Project One I recounted a conversation I had with Bob, the Plek board chairperson, in a car ride home after a Plek conference. Actually, it was not much of a conversation. Bob offered some ideas on what could have been done differently in the conference and questioned my decision to give a free book to conference participants as a gesture of appreciation for their contributions. My engagement was mostly in a conversation with myself. As I wrote in Project One – “I can see the validity of some of your suggestions Bob. You are not being very balanced in your observations for there was much that worked well during the events. Can’t you view the book offer as an act of generosity to the learners, and readers, in Plek?” Bob persisted, and added that giving the books away was like a drug dealer offering free samples of drugs to hook new buyers. At this point I raised my hand and said, “Uncle!” This had the intended impact of ending the conversation, and acknowledging his point.

A couple years later during a 2007 Plek board meeting when Bob was pressing me about who would be assuming responsibility for the next phase of the PD MRSA initiative, I noticed that despite several attempts to explain to him that it was me who would carry out this role, he kept pressing. I responded pointedly by saying, “Bob, you are *not* listening to me!” Others added that I had made my position clear on three occasions during the meeting. On the drive back to New Jersey after this meeting, Bob, as is his habit, initiated an evaluative conversation about the just completed meeting. He wondered with some exasperation why we did not stick to the agenda and processes that had been planned. I had allowed diversion from the meeting plans by enabling some conversations meander off the primary subject. We explored our differences and viewpoints with some vigor and

I worked to “hang in there” as we made our way north on Route 95. I did not back away from the differences as I did in the earlier car ride conversation. I happened to mention during our exchange the progress I thought I was making in adopting a more detached and less emotional stance in trustee-related conversations, such as the one we were having. Bob responded, saying “I’ve noticed.”

I recognize that working differently with Bob entails some risks, since as I have elaborated on several occasions in this thesis Bob contributes significant time and money to Plek. If he reacted negatively to the different stances I am taking in our conversations there clearly could be some negative consequences for the Institute. Yet, I believe this is a risk worth taking, one Bob most likely welcomes.

The way of thinking articulated in this synopsis is encapsulated to the best of my knowledge in the theory of complex responsive processes, aspects of which were introduced throughout this thesis (Griffin, 2002; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2001; Stacey, 2003a; Stacey, 2003b; Stacey, 2005; Stacey, 2007; Stacey & Griffin, 2005; Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2000). For me, this theory is much more consonant than the more systemic-based management scholarship with the organizational experiences explored in my research. The impact of conventional systems thinking on the management literature is quite striking and all pervasive. It did not matter if the topic was performance evaluations, leadership of nonprofit associations, organizational life cycles and start-ups, or managing volunteers or boards of trustees, the insights and prescriptions were essentially the same. They called for effort to optimize the performance of the system by applying rational controls to the parts (basically the people in the system). They assumed managers were able to objectively understand the system and its parts and can predict the outcomes from their interventions. If problems arose their causes were to be found in the parts, or people, of the system, and the solutions were to change people.

Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, in developing their theory of complex responsive processes, radically challenge systemic thinking in organizational theory and management. Instead of a focus on two levels, the parts (people) and the system (organization), they focus on human interacting. They view these interactions as nonlinear and incredibly complex, making surprise, uncertainty and unpredictability the norm, instead of stability and predictability. With such a view they argue it is futile for managers to prescribe actions

to achieve selected outcomes and expect them to be realized. Instead they call for leaders to pay attention to interdependencies among people, what is going on in between people, and the patterns of relating they create. These are what generate the “stuff” of organizations. These interactions and interdependencies shape the values, identities and feelings of anxiety in individuals and the groups they comprise which simultaneously turn back and shape the nature of interactions and interdependencies. Because all relationships among people are inextricably interdependent, power is an aspect of everyday relating. All these aspects of complex responsive processes were in evidence in the narratives contained in this thesis.

I hope readers find this research responds productively to the calls by many for new insights into the nature of nonprofit organizations and their management. This need is articulated by the leading U.S. scholar on nonprofit organizations. “Few aspects of American society are as poorly understood or as obscured by mythology as the thousands of...organizations that comprise America’s private, nonprofit sector” (Salamon, 1999, p. 7). This masking is compounded, as shown on multiple occasions in this research, by the firm grip that systems thinking has on organizational research and management practice. Shaw puts it this way:

Within the rationale of an accepted systematic discourse aspects of our experience become rationally invisible to us, the discourse itself does not afford us opportunities to draw attention in certain ways and a certain voice is unable to speak. This sense of being constrained in a prison one is helping to sustain can affect us all.

(Shaw, 2002, p. 96)

My hope is tempered by the recognition that insights presented here only represent a pausing point in a journey to seek greater understanding and not some ultimate truth. I tried to give the reader a sense for the dynamic, ever-moving and deepening nature of the research process I experienced. If another draft had been written, the findings would be undoubtedly different and possibly fuller. Coming to this view gave me an appreciation for Dewey’s observation about the difficulties in understanding experience given its “tangled” and “complex” nature and his warning about broad generalizations (Dewey, 1958, p. 26).

Despite this caution, I do feel I have a fuller grasp for the dynamics in nonprofit associations like Plek Institute and new options for my actions as a leader. I have come to realize a twist in Joas' statement about the generally unconscious and compelling nature of values. Instead of "I can do no other", I can do other (Joas, 2000, p. 5). After reading my research, I hope others feel likewise.

*...the power of richness lies in the fact that it feeds on itself in ways that enlarge our understanding of the human condition.*

(Weick, 2007, p. 18)

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