

A generative approach to organizational change is designed to be life-giving – it builds organizational capacity not only to continue to improve ‘what is’ but to make evolutionary leaps to ‘what’s possible’. However, many organizational change initiatives are based on a traditional problem-solving view. In this attempt to reduce organizations to a finite set of problems to be fixed, the potential for generative change is often ignored.

**Generativity** is an emerging worldview which recognizes that an organization is more than just the sum of its people, products and services. This worldview sees organizations not as ‘problems to be solved’ but as ‘miracles to be appreciated’. As author Charles Eisenstein says, a miracle is simply something that is impossible from an old story but possible from within a new one. It is an expansion of what is possible. This view suggests new approaches to organizational learning, and recognizes that what emerges from learning constantly, and learning together, is something beyond anything traditional planning, problem solving, and prediction can produce.

Organizations that embrace a generative worldview move beyond adaptive learning, which is about coping in a somewhat linear way with conditions created by the outside environment. Increased adaptiveness is only the first stage. Companies need to focus on generative “double-loop” or even “triple-loop

learning” that constitute **generative learning**. Generative learning also emphasizes continuous experimentation and feedback in an ongoing examination of the very way organizations go about defining and solving problems, surfacing assumptions, challenging beliefs and operating values. Generative learning is about creating – it requires systems thinking, shared vision, personal mastery, team learning, and creative tension between the vision and current reality. Generative learning, unlike adaptive learning, requires new ways of looking at the world. It also requires a variety of skills and tools including causal loop diagrams for systems thinking, dialogue to build shared vision, and coaching for personal mastery.

The conscious choice of a generative worldview enables an individual, organization, or a system to draw from an unlimited repertoire of options for achieving both short- and long-term outcomes. We become free to consider a radically different set of assumptions that give us a radically different set of outcomes (including new problems and dilemmas) than we are experiencing today. Operating from possibility rather than resignation, we can create the future into which we are living, as opposed to merely reacting to it when we get there. David Bohm talked about this generative order where, depending on our state of consciousness, we can ‘participate in how reality unfolds’.

The nurturing of **generative relationships** achieves a shift to participating in unfolding reality. In this approach new ideas and strategies emerge from such relationships inside and outside the organization. Generative relationships blossom and thrive in organizations where strategy, culture, structure, and capabilities are aligned – continuously aligning as a whole. Alignment enables all members of an organization to attend to dialogue, a fundamental discipline of generative learning and relationships.

**Dialogue** helps organizational members find safe ways to talk about even the most difficult, hidden aspects of an organization's life to create a shared reality. This involves examining what is happening inside and outside the organization, interpreting information through diverse viewpoints, unearthing and challenging basic assumptions. Dialogue results in transformative thinking and action because it encourages people to look through different lenses simultaneously and as a consequence, become conscious of an emerging bigger picture. Quantum leaps in effective organizational action become possible when a bigger picture gains both clarity and collective meaning for a critical mass of people in the organization.

When the future is complex, the path forward is discovered through generative relationships. Through them, new strategies that emerge which produce new sources of value that could be seen in advance.

*When really innovative ideas are needed, when the future is very uncertain, traditional approaches to planning are of limited use. The role of leadership is to foster generative relationships and learn from the results, letting direction emerge instead of being set in advance by central authority.*

Complexity theory suggests some essential pre-conditions, some characteristics to look for or build into generative relationships:

- **Directional alignment** – agreement about a general direction or interest area
- **Diversity** – differences, diversity of ideas and competencies among people
- **Mutuality** – implicit or explicit permission for parties to engage in explorations
- **Commitment to action** – ability, willingness for individuals to engage in joint action, to do more than talk

Generative relationships are also distinguishable by their focus on listening and inquiry, their active, appreciative, and co-creative stance, and their intent to be clarifying, integrity evoking, and to elicit breakthroughs. Truth-telling is valued, partners are committed to unleashing each other's potentials, and personal discomfort is a vital feedback loop. The result is exponential synergy.

**Generative coaching** facilitates organizational learning. It fosters a relatively rare and special relationship between learning partners, and requires them to act as ‘stewards’ in service of each others’ goals, completely independent of their immediate interests and projects.

*Generative coaching focuses on developing creative abilities; its strength lies in giving individuals new ways to initiate and implement organizational agendas that are not mere extensions of the status quo.*

A generative approach views learning partners as co-creators in a continuously changing, evolving landscape that is rooted in their evolving personal identities and the evolving identity of the organization. Partners in generative coaching relationships are most effective when they function at the leading edge of each other’s knowing, doing, and being.

**Generative learning communities** are sanctioned ‘skunkworks’ for generating, incubating and spreading highly leveraged learning or change innovations. Their mission is to spawn self-evolving practices and processes throughout the formal organization. They find, attract, aid, and champion those going for breakthroughs in both business results and capacity-building.

*The members of a generative learning community are a purposeful community of learners committed to evolving themselves, their teams, and their organizations in a way that best serves the common good.*

The process for building a generative learning community is a bit like growing a garden. It requires special care and attention. Success is most likely if:

- There is a sharp focus on building key organizational capabilities most essential to business strategy
- The natural innovators, those who are already seeking change, are involved in pioneering it. These innovators are supported in enrolling those next most likely to change, the early adopters. The early adopters will naturally attract the interest of the early majority, and so on. The Stanford Research Institute has found that when an innovation is adopted by 20% of the population it is virtually unstoppable; it has become a generative process that will move naturally through the rest of the population. The secret of growing a successful generative learning community is to design it to attract and support the innovators and early adopters, and then let nature take its course.

- Ultra-high leverage ideas, tools, distinctions, theories, designs, and practices that are generative—that not only have life in them but are also self-evolving are used.
- Traditional feedback loops have been vital processes for supporting organizational planning and control functions. Unfortunately these traditional control loops can tend to stifle the spirit of innovation. Commitment-learning loops can be designed and implemented in a way that elicit breakthrough commitments and harvest in-depth organizational learnings from the inevitable breakdowns. These loops can weave the capacity for self-evolution into all aspects of the organization. They can also stimulate innovation and risk-taking throughout the enterprise.
- A knowledge infrastructure is build that will support a generative learning community and the rest of the organization in becoming a community that learns as well as well as a community of learners.

A **generative leader** is someone with the capacity to sense and actualize emerging futures – to give birth to new endeavors in the realm of human collaborative activity. The conventional view of leadership emphasizes

positional power and conspicuous accomplishment. True leadership is about creating a domain in which we continually learn and become capable of participating in our unfolding future. Generative leaders do not primarily command or influence others. They set the stage on which predictable miracles, synchronistic in nature can, and do, occur. They create, day by day, a domain in which people continually deepen their understanding of reality, and become more capable of shaping their future. Several fundamental attitudes help people develop the capacity for this form of leadership:

- Servant leadership is the desire to serve other people and thereby accomplish greater results than one could through exercising authority. Servant leaders hold the aspiration that the people who work with them become healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous; more likely to become servant leaders themselves
- The central attribute of a generative leader is the search for self-knowledge, at its deepest level: “Why am I here? What am I here to do on this earth?” Generative leaders try to understand the direction where life is calling them to travel. If they have the courage to follow that destiny, then they can remain calm, steadfast, and open to inspiration—even in the face of ambiguity and turbulence. This, in turn, gives others hope and confidence.

These capacities have to do with being—the total orientation of character and consciousness—instead of doing. Sooner or later, people on the journey to generative leadership will examine their fundamental attitudes: about the way the world works, relationships, and their own purpose and commitment.

### Key Messages

- Generativity as a worldview allows for new possibilities to be uncovered
- Generative learning requires double-loop or even triple-loop feedback to move beyond just solving problems and explore a broader repertoire of both short- and long-term outcomes to create the future rather than just react to it
- Generative relationships and dialogue create a shared reality within the organization that enables transformative thinking and action within an emerging bigger picture
- Generative learning communities provide the environment and time for generating, incubating and spreading learning, change and innovation in line with business strategy
- Generative leaders with the capacity to sense and actualize emerging futures by emphasizing learning and continually deepen their understanding of reality to become more capable of sensing the future

---

### References:

- Jaworski, J. *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership* (1996)  
Lane, D. and Maxfield R. *Strategy Under Complexity: Fostering Generative Relationships* (1996)  
Malhotra, Y. *Organizational Learning and Learning Organizations: An Overview* (1996)  
Murphy, K. *Generative Coaching: A Surprising Learning Odyssey* (1995)  
Veltrop, B. *Discovering a Generative Path to Organizational Change* (1995)

### About the author: Mary Stacey, M.A.

Mary is the founder and managing director of Context Consulting. She works globally with leaders who are transforming complex organizations and systems and teaches in the University of Toronto's Strategic Leadership program.