

SIX ASSERTIONS FOR SUCCEEDING IN ORGANIZATIONS

By Geoffrey M. Bellman

We are as intrigued with the potential of organizations as we are disturbed with their reality; we are drawn into relationship with these powerful creatures out of attraction and necessity. We join our personal purpose with organizational purpose, hoping for the best and making the most of an uneasy union. For better or for worse, for rich or for poor, in sickness and in health. We struggle to find our meaning within their structures, structures not built with our meaning in mind. We know these behemoths figure in the future of life on this planet; this knowledge feeds our savior and slave fantasies—often simultaneously. We are part of a highly educated work force that each day steps into organizations that have not caught up with or don't care what we have learned about ourselves. We seek our actualization in organizations put together for other purposes. We sense our schizophrenia as our minds; our hearts proclaim the possibilities; our actions at work proclaim our fears and limitations.

And, we recognize how essential organizations are to what we have achieved so far; we see the immense potential they represent. Our organizations are mad and magnificent, wretched and wonderful, beauty and beast.

Recall the fairy tale in which a father—in hopes of saving his own life--gives his pure-hearted daughter, Belle, to the Beast. Belle, after her initial horror, chooses to look for the best in the Beast and (I don't want to ruin the story for you, but...) gradually finds it. She finds fulfillment where she first felt revulsion. Belle's story is our own—at least my own. In my thirty-five years of work with huge organizations, I have discovered that my best contributions and greatest fulfillment came from facing the corporate Beast and discovering the Beauty within it. This article offers a few of my notions about what can allow us to live with and appreciate the beauty of the beast. Not “the beauty *and...*”, but “the beauty *of* the beast.” I make six assertions which I believe are important to creating organizations that feed the human spirit

while serving the human community. These are just six of many I could make; use them to test your own: What would you assert is necessary to the life of the organizations you want to be part of?

DISCOVERING THE BEAUTY

Beautiful organizations are sometimes possible. Hopefully you have seen some in operation. Like when a work team spins off into a creative and productive session. Or, when a faculty cooperates to bring new learning opportunities to students. There are millions of fleeting glimpses of organizational beauty that suggest the possibilities in our future. If we are to see beauty in our organizations, we need to know what it is and value it. When we can imagine what we want, we will more likely be able to create it. Our ideals help us interpret and shape our experience. Imagining beautiful future organizations is not usually identified as a common corporate pastime, and discovering the beauty now present is often a challenge. And that leads to a truth for our work and our lives: Discover the Beauty. Discovering the Beauty of an organization comes with acting on these three assertions:

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- **Pursue life.**
 - **Commit to a compelling unknown.**
 - **Face the future ready to learn.**

Honoring these three assertions has the consequence of altering my approach to working within organizations. These assertions cause me to look at my work differently, to see new opportunities; to take courageous action. Let's explore these assertions and consider the provocative questions they generate.

ASSERTION ONE: PURSUE LIFE

The world is changed by passionate, committed people creating better lives for themselves, their families and future generations. This is what political revolution, the women's movement, the civil rights movement, the reformation, the union movement, and educational reform have in common. The source of energy is the larger life aspired to, worth working for now. The heart of renewal in our work

organizations is just as grand, though not as romanticized. We too are pursuing our lives in these organizations; we too are reaching for a future beyond what we have experienced; we too want the work world to be better for all who follow us. Our organizations are not renewed by people inspired by their job descriptions. No, they reach into their life aspirations, their hearts, to find the energy they need. This is where renewal energies brew; this is how organizations are enlivened over and over again into future generations.

Encourage workers to reach for what they want from their lives and they may do it! Their reach may be in directions that have nothing to do with creating a better company and everything to do with creating a better lives for themselves. This risk may be worth it—depending on our investment in the present organization, depending on whether we are workers, consultants, managers, customers, or stockholders. When we avoid the risk, we miss the creative and passionate energy that people release when they see the prospect of making better lives for themselves. To avoid the risk is to never know what we might have done together to revitalize this organization. We must choose our struggle: Whether to struggle with the issues that come from helping people release their creative energies or the issues coming from asking people to live in their present and more predictable roles. Some questions that might provoke a

healthy exploration of this include:

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- What do people key to this organizations aspire to in their lives?
 - How do they currently realize life aspirations through their work?
 - What is the organization reaching for that has the promise of fulfilling people's lives?
 - What opportunities are there to engage people in these questions?
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ASSERTION TWO: COMMIT TO A COMPELLING UNKNOWN

Imagine an organization renewal team that has been working together for six months. They are in the midst of yet another meeting to figure out how to put some visionary and risky recommendations before

the entire plant of eight hundred people. One member makes a (what turns out to be) a pivotal statement: "I don't know if our proposal will be accepted. And, I don't know whether it will work. What I do know is that we must propose it! This organization must do something and this team has the opportunity to offer a new direction--even if we risk failing in the process!" She spoke for everyone present and speaks to this assertion: Important change reaches far beyond what we know. I think it contains these defining elements:

- We have not been there before.
- It feels new, mysterious, and compelling.
- It is full of life for the people involved.
- We do not know whether we will be able to do it.
- We believe passionately in it.
- We are drawn forward by its possibilities.

Another story from the same organization a few months later—after the adoption of the renewal team's ideas: The General Manager and the consultant (me) are having a celebratory drink after a very successful three day meeting involving sixty people from the plant. Together that group had described the ambitious future they would like to create. The GM is excited about what the group had just accomplished. He begins to muse on what might happen next. And, engineer that he is, his musings become charts and charts become timelines which become decisions about what ought to be done next. My discomfort begins to grow. Though not wanting to dampen his enthusiasm, I finally burst out, "If we knew precisely where we were going, I wouldn't want to go there!" He looked at me, confused and disappointed...Then he wadded up the napkins and put them aside. "I get it!" he said, "It's not my job to make our future entirely predictable—that's what we always do. It's my job is to encourage this exploration and the discovery of what we might do next." He expressed what I was feeling.

Yes, there is a place for planning too, but in the three day group meeting people discovered the aspirations that precede and bring life to plans. They were more committed because they didn't know where they were going. If they had been going after success assured because they have been there

before, they would not be renewing their organization, just redecorating. Take these questions to the people you work with:

- Individually, what do you find compelling in what you are now doing?
- Individually, describe some projects you have participated in that were especially exciting. What made them that way?
- What would a renewal effort have to contain for you to commit strongly to it?
- What is the very best outcome we hope to see from our work together?

ASSERTION THREE: FACE THE FUTURE READY TO LEARN

Helping an organization move toward a future it has never experienced requires humility and openness. If you are committed to guiding people toward a new vision, you will be humbled frequently. If you are a person who needs to know “first and most,” you probably will take advantage of the numerous opportunities to embarrass yourself. Lack of humility is a great block to progress. Two personal examples, one of humiliation and one of humility.

I was beginning work with a new client, a marketing company. From the start, I knew what they needed. How fortunate for them to have me! I knew that we could make changes around here faster because of my success elsewhere. You can imagine what that approach did for me—and that is not the worst of it! Since I “knew”, I didn’t have to ask...In fact, I couldn’t ask. Since I was “experienced” and they weren’t, I expected deference. Since I was “wise”, I expected them to listen. My myopia cost the client and the project critical time. I was not open to learning. I took an aggressive stance and blamed them when things went wrong. This was not fun work for me to do. It even less fun for them. They decided they did not need to continue working with me.

Contrast that work with my experience on a project in my community: I helped conceive this project and joined five others in shaping its direction. Then the six of us reached out to the larger community for support. As citizens began showing up, I became more aware of how much experience I had that was potentially useful to the project and to the newly-involved citizens. I also became aware of how little they

knew about doing this kind of work. So far, I sound something like my earlier description with a dash of tolerance. But something had shifted and I approached this citizen community differently. I still knew what I knew, but also knew that I needed to learn from them. I saw this as a special opportunity for me. Instead of using my time to brag on what I already knew, I tried to find out more about them and what we were doing together. I have special talents—and they do too. I made a point of delving into their experience and they brought so much! We succeeded in creating the project together, each of us with an openness to what the future might hold and the readiness to influence it. All of us treasure that experience.

Approaching work with new eyes, the eyes of a novice, serves my work well. That is my repeated experience. My ego has made sure that I have learned this lesson over and over again. Here are questions for you to take to work:

- How does this organization uphold the importance of learning?
- Where have we seen leaders valuing humility?
- What do we need to learn? What are our key unanswered questions?
- How might we show a readiness to learn in the midst of renewal?

FACING THE BEAST

Many organizations are beastly creatures to live with; they have developed power, energy and intelligence beyond what most of us ever imagined. Many of us pull away from them. We see their lack of humanity and heart; we see their primitive power, we stand back from their threat and unpredictability. Our fears often turn to prejudice; we “know” what an organization is before we experience it. Like Belle in the fairy tale, we sense our lives are at risk; we must choose how we see the Beast before us. When I am at my best, I make Belle’s choice: I proceed with the belief that there is something to be appreciated, something worth working with. This is a courageous, hopefully not foolish, step when we take it. We may be rewarded as Belle was—the prince, the love and live happily ever after. Or we may not. We are not guaranteed those fairy tale outcomes.

There is no transporting ourselves to a new and more perfect organizational world; this is it. This is as perfect as worlds come. Whatever we will do to move ourselves or this organization in the direction of our aspirations will begin right here. This may not be the truth we want to hear, but it is a primary truth for work and life: Face the Beast. For that I offer three more assertions that start where the organization is, and respect what it brings to this moment:

- **Renewal takes root in the past.**
- **Change doesn't make sense.**
- **People spend years preparing not to change.**

If you are in an old organization, you are working with people who have been here for years. They have learned a great deal about the life of this place; they ARE the life of this place. It may not be the life that you or they aspire to, but it is life nevertheless.

ASSERTION FOUR: RENEWAL TAKES ROOT IN THE PAST

Agricultural metaphors are particularly appropriate to organizations. Their fertile, earthy, organic substance grounds those of us working in glass towers fourteen floors above dirt. Today and tomorrow are rooted in yesterday. The past held by the people who have been here through it all and proud of what they have done. They have been essential to what the organization has accomplished so far, and they will be part of what happens next. People with roots have aligned their habits and their deepened loyalties. It is easy for a new arrival to criticize these dedicated, stubborn workers. Yet the largest and most successful change efforts I've witnessed have had the support of the rooted population—not that it started out that way. No, it takes months or years of work with the people who have history here. Frustrating, hard work because they are holding onto what they have spent years learning and succeeding in. It is a challenge to use the past in building the future, but any renewal effort that disrespects this ingrained history is in for trouble.

In mature organizations, the majority who invested for the long haul represent what this organization is really about, like it or not. These folks “know” where this company is going and determinedly take it there—whether the management shares that direction or not. They are the corporate strategy in action, regardless of what leaders are espousing. These people know what is important to them and pursue it without talking about it. A newcomer may have difficulty getting them to discuss it, but their silence is not ignorance. They are investing in their security, their pension, and their future. They have decided and they intend to stick with their decision as the future unfolds.

Here lies the dilemma you face in each moment of an organization renewal effort: Respecting what has gone before while discovering what might happen next. Live in that dilemma. Do not put yourself on one side or the other, but keep it alive in yourself and in the people around you. This dilemma lives in the discussions held, the future imagined and the past respected, assuring a deeper consideration of how to best renew this place. Questions useful in this dynamic include:

- What are the essential values and purposes that made us what we are, without which we would cease to be?
- Which of these are most important to our future?
- How are we supporting the continuation of these from our past into our future?
- Who can we learn from that knows these values deeply?
- Who is it important to engage in our renewal work?

ASSERTION FIVE: CHANGE DOESN'T MAKE SENSE

Listen in as two employees get their first training on a new work process. The trainer is saying, "You have each been working here for about five years; you've done a good job...But now the company has come up with a new way for you to approach your work. We are calling it 'The ACCEL Process'; it tells you better ways to do your job...After you learn ACCEL, you will approach your work in brand new ways!" Imagine the employee reactions, the looks on their faces. For five years this company has been encouraging

them to do their jobs in just the way they are doing them—until today. Thousands of times, they found reinforcement for thinking they knew how to do their jobs. When ACCEL comes along, should it be a surprise to us that they do not leap for joy? From where they sit, change doesn't make sense. What makes sense is continuing to refine what they have been doing, to get better and better at it.

These two people resisting ACCEL may be signing up for evening classes in Spanish or line dancing. Why is it that change is attractive in the evening and resisted in the morning? It is not about sense; it's about who is motivated to change. When the ACCEL program was introduced, management was motivated to change, not these two workers. For change to work more smoothly, it must be chosen. When we force it on people, we live with the consequences. Consider these questions back at work:

- What makes sense to the people working here? How do they express that?
- What changes are considered “nonsense” to the people working here? How do they express that?
- How does this organization appreciate people's contribution, experience, service, and loyalty?
- How might we help people feel good about themselves while participating in renewal?

ASSERTION SIX: PEOPLE SPEND YEARS PREPARING NOT TO CHANGE

Imagine a department full of accountants who have been working quite successfully and separately for seven years. Imagine that you have a plan that would allow them to assist each other in getting the work done. It's a good plan; it would enrich their work; it would serve customers better; it would cost less; and it would even make the accountants happier, more fulfilled people.

These accountants have spent at least seven years preparing not to accept your plan: They have found working alone rewarding enough that they have not quit. They have each shown up for work over 1800 days and done their jobs. They have created informal systems and social groups; they have norms for dealing with each other; they have jokes that relate to their work, their bosses, the company, and each other. They are not saying, “We want to keep doing just what we have been doing the way we have been doing it.” But showing up for years makes them more determined to do what they have been doing.

They have been preparing for years not to do what you are now proposing.

This is reality, not to be cursed, but accepted. When you offer this great opportunity, and the accountants frown and go, “HUH???” this is your opportunity to say to yourself (brightly), ‘Well, of course!

They have spent years moving and learning in a direction different from what I am suggesting. And the department has rewarded them for being predictable in doing the work as the department wanted it done.’

And you could say further to yourself, ‘No, I am not going to rail against them because they are stuck in old ways and cannot see the brilliance of the future I am offering...No, I am going to stop and learn about what they have been doing for years and how they feel about it because THAT is my starting point for engaging them in thinking about new ways of designing their work.’ Yes, you could say all of that to yourself...But will you?

Here are some questions to open that subject at work:

- What are some habits we have established that have been valuable to us?
- What are examples of habits we had that we have replaced? What caused us to change?
- What is our reaction when people suggest we change what we’ve been doing for years?
- How could we reconsider work habits to make sure they serve us well?

As these questions imply, we are the accountants. We have our habits as well; we need to go through the same considerations we are bringing to the accountants.

These last three assertions are among the many I can make when facing the beast in the organization. What would you assert? What do you believe is necessary as organizations struggle to become their better selves? These three assertions rooted in the beastly past are every bit as essential to the organization renewal dynamic as the three more beautiful assertions offered at the beginning of this article. It is a matter of discovering the beauty by facing the beast. Easy to say, hard to do, a life challenge.

Based Geoff Bellman's book, *THE BEAUTY OF THE BEAST: Breathing New Life into Organizations*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco. 2000.