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A commitment to being a conscious person is lifelong. Leading “the committed life” means constant vigilance, impeccable discernment, and an ongoing willingness to continuously examine oneself, one’s values, and one’s relationships to oneself, to others, and to the world. Living this sort of self-examined life is what brings meaning and worth, for the individual as well as the organization, reminding us of Socrates’ statement that “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

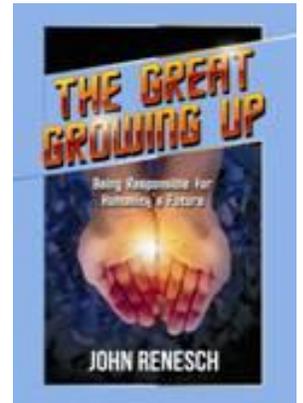
The Conscious Organization: Prospects for a Self-Actualized Workforce

JOHN RENESCH, AUTHOR, *THE GREAT GROWING UP*
SAN FRANCISCO, CA

Introduction

Given the ever-growing crises in the world today, perhaps there’s no better time to point to the long-denied dysfunctionality of many of our modern organizations. Politicians locked in gridlock, nations teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, the “global commons” under threat, and terrorism are just some of the manifestations of the dysfunction we see in the news daily. Not only are most of our social systems ineffective, some are actually generating results contrary to their original purpose.

Remember — organizations were created to serve us and make our lives easier. Otherwise, why would we have created them? Yet so many people feel more like slaves to these organizational systems than masters of them. So how could this change? How can we restore full functionality and consciousness to our organizations so we are able to prevent a global economic meltdown? How can we regain mastery over our organizations so they serve *us* and not the other way round?



The Learning Organization

Sloan Management School’s Peter Senge popularized the term “The Learning Organization” when he published the bestselling business book *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990. The term embodied the

ideal that companies shift from a know-it-all environs to a culture of willingness and pragmatism. The popularity of this idea grew partially out of the tremendous acceleration of new technologies, ever quickening flow of information, and increasing obsolescence of yesterday's wisdom. It also came at a time when many companies were beginning to realize they'd become complacent and were losing their competitive edge. This wakeup call contributed to the receptivity for such a new idea.

Organizations around the world now strive to model themselves around this *learning organization* concept. Thousands of consultants, in-house and external, have become specialists in the process. It is now a well-accepted philosophy for any thriving enterprise and an accepted mainstream subject in business academe.

The ideal learning organization includes a workforce that is constantly acquiring knowledge, receptive to new ideas, prepared to change its operations, and ready to implement new and better practices. Corporate cultures embracing this philosophy have committed themselves to an open-minded way of working collectively. The *learning organization* was a vast improvement over the immutable, unflinching organization that was wholly unprepared for reform as the Information Age rapidly made advancements. Nevertheless, it failed to exemplify the ultimate organizational design suited for the "Age of Consciousness" that British futurist Peter Russell predicted would arrive sometime between 2010 and 2020 in his 1980's book, *The Global Brain*.

Humanistic psychologist and motivation scholar, Abraham Maslow, postulated that it was man's nature to be discontent – what he called his "Grumble Theory." Most famous for his "Hierarchy of Needs" which declares that self-actualization is a state sought by all human beings once they have satisfied the more basic needs of survival, sexual gratification, and belonging, Maslow emphasized our urgent inclination to achieve higher levels of consciousness — and ultimately, self-actualization.

As people evolve toward self-actualization and become more conscious beings, there is a concurrent need for our organizations to follow suit. As this evolving process becomes more widely recognized and people continue on their individual paths of self-actualization, the enterprises, institutions, and companies within which human beings come together to work will need to change dramatically. If they don't, the fate of these organizations is simple. They will not survive. People who are becoming self-actualized will no longer want to work in them.

The Conscious Organization

Building upon the *learning organization* concept, I developed the idea of the "Conscious Organization" in the late 1990s. The conscious organization possesses very low tolerance for unconsciousness behavior, such as idle gossip, rumors, office politics, breaches of ethics, addictions of all sorts, and other symptoms of organizational bureaucracy and incompetency. People working in conscious organizations possess the collective will to be vigilant about matters that might fester under the surface of awareness or otherwise go unnoticed in organizations that do not embody this commitment in their cultures.

Whenever an unconscious element of a conscious organization's culture is recognized, a rallying cry emanates and the organization's resources are marshaled toward "cleaning up" that area much like the human body's immune system rallies itself for any invading infection or toxic agent. Instead of being tolerated or temporarily placated, these "toxic agents" are purposefully and vigilantly sought out and transformed.

Becoming *conscious* is becoming aware of something and then acting responsibly in light of the new awareness. It is not synonymous with awareness alone, as some dictionaries state. Responsible action is another element of human consciousness. Responsible action does not mean acting compulsively or reactively. It means choosing consciously, resulting in the least number of unintended consequences.

The conscious organization is a group of people who are constantly examining their individual and collective consciousness. By definition, this makes the conscious organization a work-in-progress. People who like certainty and familiarity may not be comfortable in a conscious organization.

While there may be some entities which can be transformed into conscious organizations, I suspect most will need to be replaced. After all, some of these dysfunctional dinosaurs are just too big and too dysfunctional. It would be far easier (and probably cheaper) to create anew. As visionary inventor Buckminster Fuller wrote decades ago, “You never change things by fighting existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”

A Lifelong Commitment

A commitment to being a conscious person is lifelong. Leading “the committed life” means constant vigilance, impeccable discernment, and an ongoing willingness to continuously examine oneself, one’s values, and one’s relationships to oneself, to others, and to the world. Living this sort of self-examined life is what brings meaning and worth — for the individual as well as the organization — reminding us of Socrates’ statement that “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

Since an organization is a collection of individuals who have come together to work for some common purpose, an organizational commitment to being conscious requires the same continuous exploration and re-examination that is needed to achieve personal consciousness. A company wishing to be a conscious organization needs to embrace this commitment to continuous self-examination as a core ideal throughout its life.

Since the conscious organization is antithetical to a dysfunctional one, its commitment to explore any “shadows” that come to light is totally contrary to the less-healthy company which often serves as a refuge for co-dependent behaviors. The term “shadow” was coined by psychologist Carl Jung to describe some unwanted trait that avoids self-recognition, often leading to acute levels of denial — a total unwillingness to see or recognize parts of ourselves we rebuke. There is plenty of evidence that today’s organizations are well-populated with shadows and un-evolved egos — the enemies of self-actualization.

People working and interacting in a conscious organization are open and willing to discover any unconscious patterns and penetrate any barriers they may have that prevent full functionality. Having a conscious and healthy relationship with co-workers and the organization’s mission is of paramount importance, far more important than any individual’s need to maintain his or her image, political advantage, the illusion of control, or remain in denial about something that violates the core principles of consciousness.

You never change things by fighting existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.

— *Buckminster Fuller*

Unlike ambush-like interventions which might occur in some more dysfunctional organizations, conscious organizations welcome interventions. They are poised to seize opportunities to jettison any behaviors, people, policies, or practices which do not serve the group's consciousness and, thus, the performance of the enterprise.

Conscious organizations are always prepared to rebuke complacency and strive for greater awareness and responsible action. They are engaging places to work for people who desire to be more conscious themselves and are seeking work environments that energize them. Everybody in a conscious organization knows that seeking greater enlightenment – i.e., shining light into the shadows and curing any dysfunction before it gains any momentum – is highly valued and takes responsibility for calling attention to anything that frustrates its mission.

Conclusion

Our potpourri of global crises can serve us by creating an opportunity for more people to consider a new generation of organization. How about you? Are you ready to work in a conscious organization? Would you welcome the opportunity to either transform your company or institution or create a new one in which shadows are illuminated and dysfunction is cured so the enterprise can become more effective and the people more fulfilled? If you embrace this idea, I suggest you start to explore options and resources for making such a commitment and implement such a transformation for your organization. If the transition is successful, I guarantee it will be worth it.

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Biographical Note

John Renesch is a San Francisco-based businessman-turned-futurist. He's an international keynote speaker and has published 14 books and hundreds of articles on leadership and organizational and social transformation. He's received much praise as a business/social seer: Warren Bennis, best-selling American author of leadership books for thirty years, calls John "a wise elder who shines with wisdom." Stanford University's School of Business's Michael Ray calls him "a beacon lighting the way to a new paradigm." His latest book is *The Great Growing Up; Being Responsible for Humanity's Future*.

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