



28 September 2023

A living imperative: high performance and social wellbeing at work

Special note

September's blog is late due to the release during the last two weeks of September of the publications I cite. There will be two blog postings in October.

Aim of blog

I would like to shine light on three recent publications that together bring a new sense of urgency to Global SoL founder Arie de Gues call to action in 2014.

Society for Organizational Learning Global Forum Paris, France 2014

“I think what is needed, what is waiting for you, the next generation, is to find ways to change the internal structures of business and governmental institutions to become much more in harmony with the value systems that have developed since the second world war. That's your job. That's what is waiting for you and that's a very difficult problem. That's really organizational learning by accommodation”. [1]

This shows Arie's sense of urgency regarding institutional change and his understanding of Piaget's learning theory – a theory based on a new epistemology. For Piaget, knowledge arises

individually and collectively in the general coordinations of actions [2]. I'll keep Aries call to action in mind and return to it.

First HP Work Relationship Index Shows Majority of People Worldwide Have an Unhealthy Relationship with Work. [3]

In his introduction to this September 20, 2023 report, HP's CEO Enrique Lores writes:

I believe there is a huge opportunity to strengthen the world's relationship with work in ways that are both good for people and good for business. And it's critically important that we do – because the world's relationship with work today is strained.

HP researchers found that the expectations of work have drastically changed over the past two years.

When employees are not happy with their relationship with work, it takes a toll on business:

Morale and Engagement: Knowledge workers report less productivity (34%), more disengagement at work (39%) and greater feelings of disconnection (38%).

Retention: Even when employees feel neutral about their relationship with work, more than 71% consider leaving the company. When they're not happy at all, that number rises to 91%.

Unhealthy relationships with work can impact employees' well-being:

Mental: More than half (55%) of these employees struggle with their self-worth and mental well-being, reporting low self-esteem and feeling like they are a failure.

Emotional: These issues naturally affect other aspects of their lives, with 45% noting that their personal relationships with friends and family suffer, and more than half (59%) are too drained to pursue their personal passions.

Physical: Mental and emotional wellness can make it harder to maintain physical well-being. 62% of employees report trouble with maintaining healthy eating, working out and getting sufficient sleep. [4]

HP's study of over 15,000 knowledge workers tells us that the illbeing at work has not changed since the Wellcome study of 2020 [5] and even earlier the 2004 Whitehall II study of work, stress and health [6]. We know that the correlations between health and productivity are strong and we have known this since Lester Thurow's book on human capital [7].

Now that we know we know this, we might read the second publication with a deeper understanding of the work that must be done to do exactly what HP's Lores and Arie suggest – systemically transform institutions to repair the world's relationship with work.

Mutilation of the tree of life via mass extinction of animal genera [8]

The 6th mass distinction caused by human activities is more severe than it was thought to be and accelerating. With the continuation of habitat destruction, illegal trade and climate change we find ourselves in the great acceleration of the degradation of the biosphere we depend on and still without planetary stewardship [9]. If Ceballos and Erlich's focus on the tree of life

seems a bit too abstract, there is data we can confirm in our daily living to be found in the 2023 State of Nature Report [10].

State of Nature report 2023: UK wildlife continues to decline [10]

This report covers the UK, crown dependencies and overseas territories and was compiled by the National Trust in collaboration with conservation organizations. The data is alarming.

Since 1970, species in the UK have declined an average of 19% but the average obscures species by species impacts.

The most at-risk groups included birds, amphibians and reptiles, fungi and lichen and land mammals. Turtle doves, water voles, lady's slipper orchids and European eels are among the species affected. More than half of plant species have also declined, as have 59 per cent of mosses and liverworts (bryophytes). Pollinators such as bees and butterflies are among the worst-hit groups, falling by 18 per cent on average.

Habitats for wildlife were also found to be faring badly, with only one in seven of those assessed for the report in a good condition. This included only a quarter of peatlands and seven per cent of woodlands found to be in a good condition. None of the sea floor around the UK was in a good state because of damage caused by discarded fishing gear.

[10]

Now that we know we know the health of nature we depend on

Arie's call to action is even more relevant and urgent than it was almost 10 years ago. Now we know that the health of the biosphere and the health of knowledge creating institutions are in decline, what shall we do? What future are we bringing forth for our children and grandchildren? How do we live and work well together? Can we reverse climate degradation while our organization of work results in unnecessary stress, heart disease and ill mental health for those we depend on to reverse both trends?

The answer to these questions resides in our daily living. Aries' reminder to study Piaget is sound. Prior to 1975, people with developmental disabilities in the US were subject to abuse and neglect that cannot be imagined. The theory of knowledge justifying these atrocities thought of knowledge as innate and intelligence measurable using IQ tests. In 1975, a liberation movement begun by the Developmentally Disabled Assistance and Bill of Rights Act [11], changed American society with a new theory of knowledge. This theory embodied by Piaget's study of children [12], presented knowledge as a developmental process and intelligence as the adaptation to an ever-changing present.

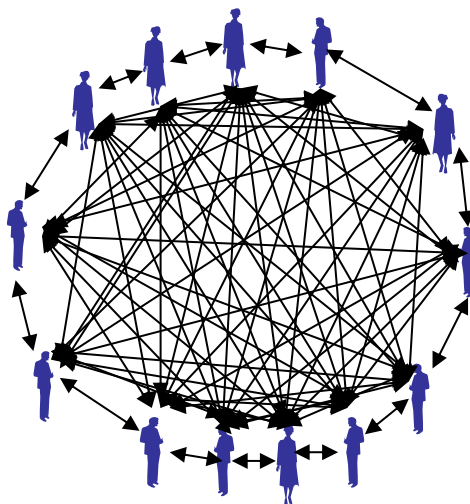
Most importantly, the liberation movement depended upon *applied* social and behavioral science that generated empirical evidence that people with developmental disabilities could live well in our communities. Holocaust like state-run institutions were closed and funds to operate them were invested in community-based developmental support services [13, 14]. I was leading

a research team at the University of Oregon studying the social impact of employing people with developmental disabilities in community settings. Our findings were systemic and led to a new understanding of the relationship between social support networks and productivity [15, 16]. This led me to work of Maturana and Varela.

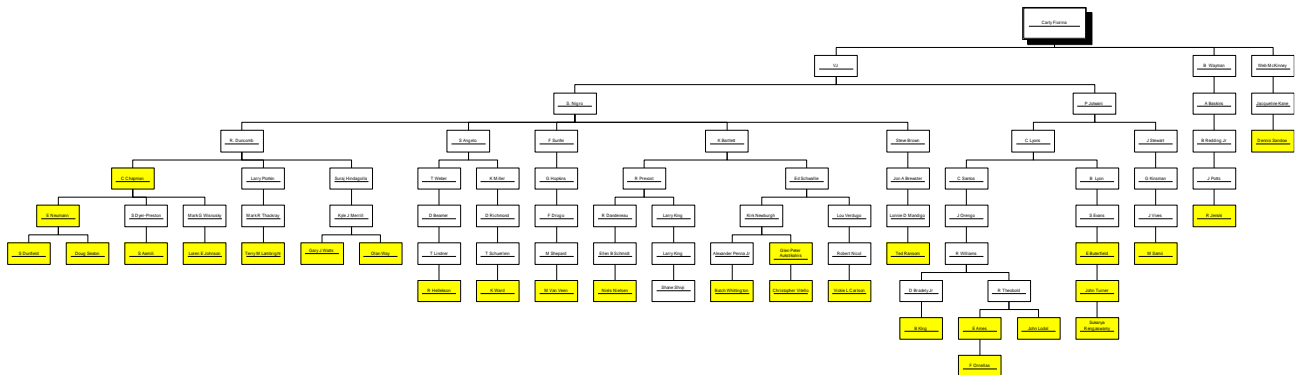
A few years ago, just as the pandemic was breaking long lasting social networks, Heidi Guber and I convened a group around Arie's challenge. I practiced social action research at Cascade Medical Center, Hyphn, and the Society for Organizational Learning in Japan. I asked them one question, "How do you work well together?" Here is what we found.

Social network structure

In all three organizations the social network structure was a collaborative network where everyone in the network sees everyone else in the network in working well together. One way to look at this data is to see that if the management hierarchical organization chart were the network image of the industrial era, the collaborative network, or social system, is the network image of the knowledge economy.



These networks also span the traditional organization chart, such as this network at HP developing a health product with members shaded in yellow.



Gone are the separation of business functions including HR, Operations and Sales and the ranking the organizational chart is based on. This validates Putnam's social capital theory positing that productivity is created in horizontal and reciprocal network structures.

In earlier work I stressed the structure of networks, arguing that "horizontal" ties represented more productive social capital than vertical ties. [17]

Organization of the social system

Humberto Maturana wrote Heinz von Foerster in 1973 clarifying the distinction between structure and organization.

Structure "is used to refer to emphasis components and their relation when talking of a whole; while organization is used to emphasize the role the parts have in the constitution of a whole, and, hence, refers to the relations that constitute a unity. Thus,

two systems are equivalent if they have the same organization even if they have different structure; or, a system retains its identity while its organization remains invariant even though its structure changes as happens in living systems along their ontogeny. An interesting clarification is that this distinction makes it obvious that whenever there is a change of organization there is a change of a system; or, in other words, that the identity of a system is bound to the invariance of its organization. The traditional difficulty is talking about a whole and its relations to its parts or components, obviously stems from the confusion of structure with organization. The properties of the whole are determined by its organization, while its structure is determined by its parts, hence, it is obvious that the properties of the whole are not to be found in the properties of its parts." [18]

Organization tells us what sort of system we are observing. If we are observing a group of people playing soccer the system is a soccer system in the domain of sports. In this distinction we describe networks of networks of relations through structural couplings connecting a multitude of constantly changing systems conserving their organization. Understanding organization in social systems requires listening to those in the network of relationships explain how they do what they do while they conserve the organization (identity or class) of the system. This is qualitative research and the organization of the system appears in the regularly occurring explanations.

The organization at Cascade Medical Center, Hyphn and the Society for Organizational Learning Japan had many common explanations such as freedom, supporting each other, openly sharing knowledge, collaboration, recognition, and feelings of the closeness of kin ship or families.

The nature of our humanness when we are living and working well together

Cascade Medical Center provides medical care in the mountains of Idaho. That's about as rural as it gets. Hyphn designs office spaces in the Pacific Northwest and is located in Portland, Oregon. Those I learned from at the Society for Organizational Learning in Japan were dispersed.

One of the strong themes from this social action research trilogy is how different the communities of participants were. Think about this through Humberto's systemic lens. The *structure* of the social system could not be more diverse, but, the *organization* of the social system as a space to live and work well together by acting freely, caring for each other, celebrating their contributions, and, openly sharing knowledge through family relations. This fantastic!

In the three social action research studies our reflections revealed a common organization. A common social system from which exemplary organizational performance grows exponentially, arising from living and working well together. Everything that changes in this social system of

living and working well together changes around the conservation of the organization of the social system.

I claim to have achieved what HP's CEO Enrique Lores called for in his introduction to HP's work research – “to strengthen the world's relationship with work in ways that are both good for people and good for business.” I also claim that this is the result of my good fortune to listen act upon Arie de Gues' call to action – “to find ways to change the internal structures of business and governmental institutions to become much more in harmony with the value systems that have developed since the second world war.”

Finally, I claim that social action research is a practice that reveals the nature of our humanness from a cultural-biology perspective [19, 20]. And, when we study the nature of our humanness from a cultural-biology perspective we see ourselves conserving our preferences for living and working well together. It is our biology as languaging beings to form relationships through networks of networks of conversations flowing through a constantly changing present to live and work well together.

This leaves this lengthy post to a question about the niche that surrounds us – the nature we depend upon. Once again, I look back to the last days of September and find yet another compelling article – Our fragile earth [21]. I'll end with Michael Mann's reflections.

“We don’t know precisely how close we are to triggering some devastating tipping point that could threaten human civilization. The collective evidence from the past tells us that we’ve still got a safety margin. Science tells us that if we act quickly, if we act dramatically, we can avoid warming that will bring far worse consequences. That’s the fragility of this moment: we have a little bit of a safety margin, but it’s not a large safety margin. The phrase I use often these days, a phrase that characterizes the message of this book, is the pairing of urgency and agency. Yes, it’s bad, and we face far worse consequences if we don’t act. We can see devastating climate consequences already. That’s the urgency. But the paleoclimate record tells us we haven’t triggered runaway warming yet. We can avoid that point of no return if we act quickly and dramatically. That’s the agency. We’ve got 4 billion years of Earth history. Let’s try to learn from it.”

[22]

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