

Adaptive Leadership: Planning in a Time of Transition

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The premise in this article is that adaptive leadership continues a significant stream in organizational development literature. If, however, underlying values are not understood and accepted, the practices espoused by adaptive leaders will be nothing more than tools mechanically and ineffectively applied. Elements of adaptive leadership that seem helpful when planning in times of transition are highlighted. The appendix describes a number of processes that can be adapted for use.

*Organizations are like leaky boats.
You will spend all your career bailing. ~Ted Ward*

Adaptive leadership is a logical next step in a decades-long stream of organizational development emphasis and practice, and its tenets and practices are worth considering. While focusing on yet another approach to organizational leadership can lead to yet more simple application of technique, two tenets of adaptive leadership are important in light of the challenges that confront theological schools.

First, adaptive leadership is rooted in the recognition that people, not systems, are the engine for organizational development; and, second, planning processes require leaders and members of the organization to suspend tendencies to preserve what is or, at the very least, to make changes that are of such a nature that what is will not be significantly affected. By extension, planning processes always begin and end with people, and they take time—largely because of the hard conceptual work required. A plan is never forced into being; it emerges as people learn how to work together and make decisions together. Planning requires time to reflect, synthesize, observe, and identify patterns.

But isn't this precisely what should characterize higher education in its best state? The enterprises of scholarship, learning, evaluation, and development of people require reflection, connection, and practice across time. Of all the organizations on the planet, theological schools should be among the best at these tasks! The appendix describes selected exercises that can be adapted to foster reflection, connection, and practice. The exercises reflect the realization that the process of identifying problems or limitations that have to be fixed is essentially flawed; "solving" one problem always creates other problems that then have to be fixed, which generates other problems, and so on.

*We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used
when we created them. ~Albert Einstein*

When I began my career in academia and church leadership some forty years ago, the models of change and leadership were mostly static, scientific, predictable, and governed by certain rules or formulae. A basic approach was to identify problems that were troubling the organizational machinery and attempt to fix them. It was simply accepted that leaders could manage change, or create it, through the application of certain techniques. The focus was variously on goals, objectives or outcomes (e.g., Management by Objectives), numbered stages (e.g., Kurt Lewin's 3-stage model; Edgar Huse's 7-stage model), or other models that applied certain treatments to organizations to achieve certain results or to diagnose and fix certain problems. The stars were the managers, and the culture of the organization was the one visible in the boardroom or executive suite. And even if leaders, or organizations for that matter, had a reputation for responding well to events, the inner processes of the organization were sometimes less than hospitable for people—or even toxic.

In any organization, the fundamental tasks of leadership are to discern the capacities of people and to foster an environment where they can test their capacities and learn. Charles Handy¹ has observed that organizations typically operate on the assumption of incompetence. Therefore, instead of developing people, leadership is characterized by control, directives, power over the other, and resolution of conflict or differences by creating memoranda of understanding—which may or may not have been developed collaboratively. When an organization functions on the assumption of *competence*, on the other hand, paying attention to the development of people and the release of creative imagination is at least possible.

Making structures and systems—rather than people—the channels of development is a pervasive temptation and a fatal flaw in leadership. We think structures and systems are easier to control; they give the illusion of efficiency and may help us avoid that necessary dynamic called conflict. If working with people, rather than managing systems, becomes the root task, then essential processes become those of conversation, asking questions, interviewing, discerning patterns and trends, experimenting, taking risks, and so on.

Lessons from the progression of organizational theory

Most organizations, built on the lingering structures of the Industrial Age, require us to spend inordinate amounts of time propping up systems designed often in higher education to sustain uniformity, which may result in uniform ineffectiveness. Some of these systems are counterproductive to what we say we are about: the care of human knowledge, the use of knowledge in the service of humanity, the quest to understand the nature and cultural variability of human learning and development, and the implementation of that understanding in instructional design and practice.

Today, “new theories” of organizational development, organizational change, and leadership styles emerge with stunning rapidity. One website, for example, purports to categorize and describe more than 250 models of management.² In recent years, we have moved astonishingly fast through systems theories, learning organizations, and adaptive leadership. The literature on

change and leadership changes so rapidly that reliance on a model, or even a cluster of models, is tenuous at best. Organizational development is no longer an exact science—if ever it was. For example, in 2004 Jim Collins wrote confidently of companies that were *Built to Last*.³ In 2009 he published *How the Mighty Fall*,⁴ telling the stories of some of those same companies that didn't make it or that were at that time in trouble.

The persisting direction of organizational theories has been toward awareness of the dynamics in an organization that are affected by people and that, in turn, affect the development of people and the outworking of their vocations individually and in working teams. Lewin's earlier contention that leadership style affects social climate influenced the development of theories such as McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y and Schein's views on organizational culture. With the emergence of situational leadership, contingency management, transformational leadership, chaos theory, and their like, organizational predictability and the scientific approach to management almost died. Today, terms such as organizational climate, organizational culture, the learning organization, organism, sustaining innovation, and so on suggest a trend toward fluidity; open spaces; adaptive structures; nonhierarchical, flatter management; and, yes, adaptive leadership. Moving *with* people in organizations has become more important than trying to control them, and creative and fringe thinkers are valued rather than marginalized or fired.

Not surprisingly, adaptive leadership is definitely messier and requires the ability to think and act across multiple layers. One has to be convinced that leadership and planning is more than the application of technique and formulae and that people *must* be involved as dialogue partners, decision makers, and actors.

In this regard, it is worth reading Margaret Wheatley's book, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*.⁵ Wheatley proposes a return to ancient traditions of conversation in which people talk about what is important to them. Central to the process of conversation as she describes it is sharing and listening, seeking together to understand, commitment to responsible action, and reflection together on that action. Wheatley notes that most of what we would consider significant events in history began with small clusters of people talking. It should be noted here that *conversation* in this case is more than just coffee break interaction. A critical skill of leaders is to listen. But listening well involves being able to frame the sort of probing questions that help people respond with something that is worth listening to by others in the organization—something that will actually help move thought, plans, and decisions forward.

Leading people in organizations through times of transition involves fostering a climate in which people can talk about what is worthy, identify what the organization is in service to, and practice skills such as inquiry, accepting and working across difference, observing, diagnosing, and so on. In other words, leaders build strength in organizations when they think and act developmentally—which means investing in building the capacities of colleagues and in the analysis and shaping of systems that affect them. Organizations function best when people are respected and helped to do better the sorts of

things that give organizations their energy and effectiveness. Again, theological schools should be among the best in the world at these sorts of tasks! But . . .

The saga of efforts to reform higher education often seems like a Russian novel: long, tedious, and everyone dies in the end. ~Mark Yudof

Academic culture, like most everything we do and are in our schools, results from decisions made by human beings over the course of time. Decisions can be evaluated and modified, or even overturned. In their book, *Getting to Maybe*, Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman, and Michael Quinn Patton tell the stories of several men and women who discerned what was adversely affecting their situations and determined to make new decisions.⁶ The book presents principles learned from their stories. Some *principled practice items* have been adapted and synthesized for purposes of this article:

1. Classic models of strategic planning require certain logical, rational processes before action is taken. The authors make the case that spending days and weeks in data gathering, crunching numbers, creating charts and graphs, writing up a seemingly logical plan, and then establishing dates by which the plan is achieved is not the most useful way forward. Are data needed? Of course. Do we plan? Always. But often in conventional strategic planning we spend more time planning the plan, meeting to plan the plan, then meeting to determine action steps (with precise dates!), then meeting to determine who is going to carry out the action steps and who is going to supervise those who carry out the action steps, and then meeting to ask what went wrong—or why it's taking so long to fulfill the plan! Rather, build your strategy out of responses to such questions as, What data do we really need, and what are the best ways to elicit that data? Who should be involved in design and implementation? How do we secure information and feedback, foster reflection, and obligate decision making toward action that won't grind everything to a halt in the process? (In other words, leaders frustrate people when they force them to stop what they are already doing in order to complete an assignment that is already underway or even completed or to ask for a report or the collection of data that they know by experience will have zero impact on future action. How many strategic plans are languishing in your closets?)
2. For me, the flow of data gathering in an organization is always from qualitative to quantitative—with quantitative used sparingly. Data are derived from some of the following practices used at the beginning of the process and at critical points throughout:
 - Use a personal interview approach wherever possible and LISTEN. There are times when outlining one's convictions and ideas is necessary, but the leader will have greater effect by asking questions, following up with probing questions, and/or eliciting stories.
 - Practice discernment of patterns and trends in what you hear and see. Ask more probing questions and listen.
 - Walk around and observe; "feel" the organization.

- Gauge the pathologies of the organization—what or who is hurting the development of people and, consequently, the capacity of the organization to adapt. Avoid jumping to presumptions about what you see and hear. Talk with some in the organization about what you are seeing and hearing.
 - Identify the influencers and listen to their stories.
 - Engage in work and ministry *with* people. Resist the temptation to be about building your own career or maintaining your own prestige. Be a champion for others.
 - Discover the traditions and forces that have shaped the organization.
3. Development specialists, or social innovators, tend to downplay precise, measurable goals and objectives because they can be limiting. Organizations exploring alternatives and engaged in innovation “realize that they don’t yet know enough to set specific goals or measurable targets . . .”⁷ They are more likely to engage people’s perceptions about where we were and where we seem to be heading and more likely to describe progress and lessons learned about what is and isn’t working. They set up interdisciplinary or diverse teams to examine complex issues and engage in *ongoing* data collection to help people adapt decisions and policies.⁸
4. Try out small-scale initiatives to learn what works and what doesn’t. Release innovation.

There is a technical term for people who do not change. Dead.

We all know that development in schools proceeds glacially and that time to release creativity and imagination is hard to come by in higher education. There are few opportunities in an academic year and in the academic setting for substantive meetings and extended conversations.

Malcolm Warford, director of the Lexington Institute, notes that faculties find issues difficult to engage. The higher education setting is not conducive to the design of intentional strategies. The discussion of issues takes place during “happenstance gatherings at someone’s office door, casual conversations over lunch, or faculty meetings during which much other business must be discussed . . . Such discussions frequently raise great interest, because the issues noted are quickly identified as crucial to the faculty, the students, and the institution. It is even agreed, frequently, that time should be set aside to deal with these issues. Seldom, however, is such time set aside, and so the issues remain unaddressed . . .”⁹

Yet, the forces of change are pressing in upon theological schools. The challenge of the day is to discern directions within those changes, to examine what the changes are revealing in our attitudes and behaviors, and to seek to respond in ways that are appropriate. I would maintain that change is a constant, so in one sense it isn’t terribly productive to talk about creating it or managing it. In my experience, the efforts to create and manage change often lead to implementing procedures to maintain institutional structures rather than to developing processes that engage people effectively in the process.

In this respect, three bedrock principles or values have shaped my own leadership practices and attitudes across the years—hopefully the practice improving across time:

1. Those in leadership ensure that a climate exists where people can flourish, where they can find new abilities in themselves, develop them, and use them. I want to see creativity and imagination and initiative valued and encouraged. In this sense, the organization is more organic and less like a machine.¹⁰
2. Even if we have to do the hard thing with people, such as an admonition or letting them go, it is done in a way that protects humanness and dignity—and, where possible, helps the person move on to the next thing. In rare cases we may have to deal with those who are destructive and confirmed to be so by a variety of evidences. We can protect humanness, but we also fail the institution if that person is allowed to continue as a destructive agent.
3. As we foster conditions that promote and release development, our view is ever on the goal that people are developed *so that* they in turn can develop others (cf. II Tim 2:2). The organization is in service to something, and it is critical that the organization is clear about that—because it is the people who will embody and make tangible that service.

Critical skills of adaptive leaders

Most of the skills identified by Ronald Heifetz and others have something to do with how leaders make sense of the dynamics created by the actions and interactions of people in the organization.

For example, Heifetz says that “the single most important skill and most undervalued capacity for exercising adaptive leadership is diagnosis.”¹¹ He uses the term *on the balcony* to illustrate the advantage the leader has of being able to see more holistically, to view from a certain distance, to offer diagnoses based on a greater array of data. Skillful diagnosis requires the corollary capacities of observing, questioning, listening, risk taking, experimenting, interpretation, and responsible action—capacities that are best exercised in consultation with others.

The art of the question is another critically important skill. Our habitual practice as academic leaders is more like midcourse correction. We think and observe in the midst of action. It will never be possible to have all the data necessary for a complete picture before action is taken. Therefore, it is absolutely vital for academic leaders and faculty members to learn how to frame, and ask, good questions. David Cooperrider and Donna Whitney are correct when they say that human systems grow in the direction of that about which they persistently ask questions.¹² They use several tools (e.g., the World Café) to help all members of an organization learn how to craft useful questions and conduct good inquiries. The appendix provides more exercises that in a variety of ways could help improve the art of the question and stimulate *productive* engagement.

The point that Heifetz and others are making is that complex, messy organizations *require* leaders to develop and practice particular skills: openness, a willingness to be disturbed—to feel unsettled, to take risks, to experiment, to sail into uncharted waters. Such leaders encourage people to ask, What’s possible? instead of, What’s wrong? They look for ways to stimulate conversation about the extraordinary opportunities presented by the forces of change. It sometimes surprises leaders that this encouragement will create various forms of conflict as people test their capacities and ideas. In fact, conflict is a necessary part of change and development.¹³

For example, the responses of people at times of conflict or crisis reveal the array of values, prejudices, and mindsets in an organization. In some cases, what is revealed is consistent with the organization’s founding purpose. In other instances, people feel betrayed by the actions of leaders, and perhaps colleagues, because those actions violate deeply held personal values or espoused, but not practiced, organizational values. Rather than avoid or rationalize away the issues and tensions that surface at these times, adaptive leaders invite members of the organization to explore, to name, to confront, and to seek out those deeply felt values without which the organization has no meaningful existence.

An important description of adaptive leaders is that they can keep the lid on a pressure cooker long enough to allow something to “cook” but not so long as to allow tensions to rise to critical temperature. They learn how to lean into situations, applying subtle pressure to keep things moving but not to the extent that it generates unproductive resistance.

Conflict can create an opportunity for productive response to change. However, many try to avoid the conflict, or squash it by edict, rather than to seize the opportunity presented by it. The March 2010 *AARP Bulletin* features an article by Jim Wallis that speaks to values in relation to the economic crisis.¹⁴ Wallis stresses that the economic crisis has revealed a profound crisis of values and that we should be taking advantage of this opportunity to ask the value questions and to seek moral recovery. The question is not, When will this crisis end? but rather, How will this crisis change us?

Conflict avoidance can cause missed opportunities, while trying to resolve a conflict too quickly can cause loss of ideas and creativity. For example, the recent economic crisis stressed many theological schools and ramped up frustration levels at all levels of their organizations. At such times, the differences between organizations that develop infrastructure to manage scarcity and those that create infrastructure to manage opportunity are more obvious. Those preoccupied with managing scarcity will almost always attempt to reduce the organization to its smallest possible footprint so that it can be easily controlled, and differences of perspective are marginalized. They hoard what little they have and fight with each other internally to protect their share. Organizations willing to manage the opportunities presented at times of crisis will take a chance and work with their people to release ideas and energy for action.

Networking with integrity creates a greater willingness of all parties to be part of a human conduit to serve as energy and resource to one another. Sometimes you will give more than you receive and sometimes you will get back more than you give. ~Chris London

Adaptive leaders network. Many years ago, Ted Ward asserted that the challenge of the twenty-first century will be for institutions to learn how to relate to and work with other institutions. In *The Necessary Revolution*, Peter Senge states what should be obvious by now: the world is shaped by networks or webs of organizations. If you can accept that theological education does not equal theological school, and that theological education is for the whole people of God, then theological schools are one aspect of theological education. This view affects the nature of decisions made in transitional times; it also suggests that the future of theological schools must include significant partnerships across agencies.

In commenting on the consequences of the Industrial Revolution on the twentieth century, Senge observed that “No one had a plan for the Industrial Revolution. No ministry was put in charge. No single business led the way. . . . The Industrial Age was not planned but innovated. The next age will be no different. . . . today’s innovators are showing how to create a different future by learning how to see the larger systems of which they are a part and to foster collaboration across every imaginable boundary.”¹⁵

I skate where the puck will be, not where it is. ~Wayne Gretzky

Few will doubt that we are at another time in history when the structure of academic disciplines, instructional design, the integration of key administrative structures, and the role of faculty must be reviewed and new decisions made. We can learn from people such as Ronald Heifetz, but here, at the end of this article, a word of caution.

In 1903, the Wright brother’s first flight in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, launched us into a new age. To say that applying the skills of adaptive leadership to planning in a time of transition will foster a new age for theological schools is about as useful as saying the Wright brothers applied the skills of woodworking, welding, and canvas stretching to inaugurate the new era of flight. Even the attempt to involve and develop the capacities of people could be a pragmatic accommodation that masks our need to maintain the organization as we know it.

Approaches such as adaptive leadership are valuable only when the skills they highlight are integrally connected to deeply held core values that shape the way we work with people, the way we view and use knowledge, and our commitments to responsible service.

Similarly, the skills that proponents of adaptive leadership stress and the exercises presented in the appendix of this essay obligate us to suspend our desire to maintain the organization as it is, and as we presume it has always been, and to seek clarity about that which is suggestive of future directions. For example, in 2006 I wrote *Theological Education Matters*¹⁶ as a personal re-

cord of a search for key factors that seemed to shed light on why the organization that should be the most adaptive on the planet, seemed to be stuck. I proposed that four factors from the long history of higher education form a complex matrix for theological education that has to be understood as we make decisions about the future. These factors are the rise of institutionalism, influenced by the rise of professionalism (especially in the West), shaped by the rise of academic rationalism, and challenged in every age by the desire to know God. What I am trying to say here is that viewing adaptive leadership as a set of skills or techniques to make people and organizations work better is inadequate. Heifetz and others, when understood rightly, are really getting at the need for leaders to help people develop critical capacities for seeing into situations from articulated values, asking the right questions, discerning patterns and trends, synthesizing findings, determining responsible actions, and reflecting on what happens. These are very difficult capacities for groups of people to learn and practice effectively; but, again, faculty and academic leaders should be among the most effective at this complex undertaking.

The challenges we face in this twenty-first century are significant, and even threatening. Despite the appearance of stolidity and the impression of permanence created by the processing of faculty in ancient garments and bewildering hat styles, theological schools are indeed vulnerable. The vultures are not circling—yet. But the persisting criticisms and the reality that change in higher education tends to move at a glacial pace increase the probability that initiatives rapidly coming to maturity will supplant or forever change theological education as we know it.¹⁷ Planning in such times of transition is enormously complex, demanding, and requiring of more than application of a set of skills. The theory of adaptive leadership is an insightful approach if we dig down below the examples and illustrations to the bed rock of value, principle, and concept.

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Appendix

This appendix offers various exercises that can be adapted to stimulate conversation, to secure thoughtful participation from the people in the organization, and to guide responsible decision, as well as resources for further reading. They are not listed in any order of priority but share fundamental qualities particular to this article:

- They recognize the need for adaptability, flexibility, and fluidity in organizational structures.
- They recognize the importance of human engagement, listening to one another, respecting the ideas and experiences of participants in the process, releasing the creativity of people, giving people a voice in development and idea sharing, and evaluating and using criteria all have had a part in developing.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

This approach represents a cluster of theories that take an asset-based approach to organizational development (as opposed to seeking problems or limitations that have to be fixed). People in the organization are encouraged to use their imagination, experience, and perception to look forward, to reflect on the past in light of an imagined future, to identify key values that give the organization its life, and to identify strengths.

Chip and Dan Heath¹⁸ describe the process very simply: Look for the “bright spots” — those areas, however small, where something is going well. It is looking at a problem not from what is going wrong but from what is going right.

Writing about congregations, but describing an idea applicable to most organizations, Mark Branson adapts a commonly used process in AI. He suggests the use of the powerful imagery from the prophets as a people in exile reflected on their future. For example, Isaiah “offers a vision of a city in which the infants are born into a life-giving environment and the elderly live out full days in honor. The carpenters and gardeners receive the full benefit of their work . . . And those with ancient animosities (lions and lambs) are so thoroughly transformed that they can chill out together.”¹⁹ Branson suggests that one can make use of such images to help a congregation (or in our context, a school) imagine a generation or more into its future.

Rather than look for problems or weaknesses, look for what is working or what has promise. Recognize the creative capacity of people to imagine other realities, to reflect on current realities in light of an imagined future, and to capture the life-giving elements of the past to energize the present and the future. AI stresses that an image of the future always precedes actual change.

Key to AI is the formation of significant questions through a process of dialogue (that is “more than just talk”).²⁰ Questions are powerful tools.²¹ Asked inappropriately they can stifle learning. (What is this text saying?) Asked differently, they can take persons to higher levels of thinking (How would you assess the position of this author in relation to . . .?). Questions can escalate

conflict (Why do you do that?), or point toward resolution (What has brought us to this point, and what can we do about it?).²²

Cooperrider and Whitney²³ suggest that human systems grow in the direction of that about which they persistently ask questions. The seeds for development are planted as questions are asked. Therefore, inquiry is encouraged and time allowed for people to talk together and explore ideas. Various tools or processes are used to stimulate dialogue and reflection. For example . . .

Tools and processes to stimulate dialogue

WORKSHEET: Eliciting questions or tasks

Members of the organization, invited into groups that each represent the diversity of the organization, typically are given certain eliciting tasks or questions to get dialogue started. Prepare a worksheet with prompts such as the following:

- Talk about a time in the organization when you were most energized about the prospects of the organization—its contributions to . . .
- What is it that you most value about the organization and your work within it?
- As a group, determine those factors without which the organization might just as well cease to exist?

EXERCISE: Staying warm

The adaptive leadership people suggest that it is important to maintain reasonable pressure at the right time toward decision and action. The tricky thing here is to discern the right time for the pressure. Structure conversation groups around questions designed to stimulate movement or direction in your organization. Use a Google Doc exercise on an issue where no more than three in a group are writing and editing simultaneously.

EXERCISE: The 4-D model

Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard Mohr²⁴ suggest four steps in a process of dialogue:

Discovery. “What is the best of what is?” (appreciating). Explore the ways in which the organization provides service, fosters a climate for positive growth of people in the organization, affirms worth, protects dignity, and so on. What values undergird what “we are”? Here you might use a process suggested by Hallie Preskill and Anne Coghlan²⁵: Participants share their stories, at first in pairs or triads and then with the larger group. The group identifies patterns and themes common to the stories and designs an interview protocol—questions that will elicit responses from members of the organization about each of the themes. Participants conduct interviews with as many members of the organization as possible.

Dream. “What might be?” (envisioning results). Envision the organization functioning at its best.

Design. “What should be the ideal?” (co-constructing the future). Based on possible visions for the future, participants draft proposals, suggest strategies, identify areas where key decisions will be needed, and name potential teams.

Destiny. “How to empower, learn, and adjust/improvise?” (sustaining the change). Participants begin to implement ideas and proposals, monitor and evaluate progress, and engage in new phases of dialogue and inquiry. This stage is ongoing.

WORKSHEET: Confronting change in context (a guide for dialogue)

1. ***Ideas and ways of thinking are challenged constantly in each of our contexts.*** Cooperrider and Whitney suggest that the nature of the persistent questions in an organization tends to indicate its direction of growth.²⁶ Identify at least three significant questions you and others are asking about your current reality. What new directions are suggested by these questions? Given that change is inevitable, what factors are influencing these directions? What opportunities are created as a result of these new directions? In light of these directions, what trends do you see in your context? How will leaders one generation from now describe their current situation?
2. ***Each organization has a particular context—a geographical location, a social location, and a temporal location (a place in history).*** Describe the ways in which your geographical context frees you, limits you, and provides hope for you. What aspects of your social location free you, limit you, provide hope for you (social class, race, ethnicity, nationality, education, power and privilege, vocation, relationships, etc.) When you think about your time and place in history, name your most important qualities as you think about your hopes for the future.
3. ***Each organization confronts new challenges in each new contemporary age.*** Inherited assumptions about strategies related to ministry, to education, and to theology are challenged in these times. What, for you, are the most significant areas of challenge? At what points do contemporary factors challenge you most deeply? What now seems irrelevant to you? What has actually become more urgent for you? What are your sources of greatest hope for the next generation of leaders?
4. ***What patterns or themes, if any, have emerged in your conversation today?***

WORKSHEET: Imagining twenty years from now²⁷

Juanita Brown and David Isaacs describe an exercise in which participants are asked to describe how their children and grandchildren would describe the world twenty years from today. The idea can be adapted to theological institutions. For example:

It is twenty years from today. Graduates of our institution have moved out into the church and/or world in a variety of ways. They have influenced others just as this faculty influenced them. The world in which they serve has felt the impact of their leadership.

- What does their leadership look like? How and where are they serving? How do they connect with people? How do they continue to learn?

- Imagine you are sitting with the adult child of one of your former students, telling her the story of how her parent became the person he or she is today. What decisions and choices did you and others in the early twenty-first century make? What commitments did you demonstrate that helped to foster what you see in your former student?

Stimulating conversation: The World Café

The following is adapted from Juanita Brown with David Isaacs. *The World Café Shaping our Futures Through Conversations that Matter* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005).

The World Café is a hospitable space to explore questions that matter. The process encourages broad contributions from the team, connecting of diverse perspectives, and listening to and sharing of collective discoveries with a view to responsible action. The World Café design²⁸ incorporates *focused dialogue around substantive questions, shared stories, and case studies; a structured inquiry task; and one or more plenary sessions for synthesis and decision making*. In the rounds of dialogue, ideas build on one another while participants explore questions and issues that matter to them in their life and work. Though possible outcomes are often identified, conversations are not focused, at least initially, on finding solutions. The more important outcome, and one that happens best in conversation, is to discover the right questions to ask in relation to an issue. Though not necessary, some have found it helpful to have a focusing presentation prior to the three rounds of conversation. In plenary sessions, connections among ideas are explored and questions are clarified. Knowledge-sharing, possibilities for further inquiry, and opportunities for research and action may emerge.

Context

The setting is important and should allow for the comfortable face-to-face conversations where relationship and ideas can emerge. A café-style atmosphere is recommended: round tables (seating four to five per table) covered with sheets of paper or layers of paper tablecloths, and a jar filled with pens and non-bleed-through chart markers or crayons at each table. Other features of the café environment are up to the planners.

Conversations that matter: The World Café process summarized

The difference between individual participation and encouraging each person's *contribution* is important. For example, individual participation often becomes the insertion of one's particular opinions and ideas into a discussion. However, when participants are reminded that *contribution* is important, they have to think about what their insight and experience actually contributes to the conversation of the whole. In other words, participants should come to realize that they bear responsibility for moving the process along. They do this through listening, through sharing patterns they see, through offering metaphors, and by helping the group see potential blind spots. Since many adults are unaccustomed to such behaviors, practice may be required.

Round one: The first round of conversation is generally exploratory as people take time to meet one another and get used to the process. Questions are given to stimulate, but not to control, the conversation. A recorder is placed at each table to capture the essence of the table conversation. Pens, crayons, and chart markers allow participants to write notes and ideas and to draw on the paper covering the table.

Participants are at their “home” table (perhaps following a presentation). Prepare a poster for each table that reads as follows:

- Talk together about the following questions. Draw or write on the paper provided if it helps focus thought.
- What did you hear that had real meaning for you? What surprised you? What puzzled or challenged you?
- What’s important to you about what you heard and why? What questions would you like to ask now?

Round two: To begin the second round of conversation, one person stays at the home table as host. All others travel to other tables. The host shares, briefly, the essence of the table conversation with the newcomers. Travelers to other tables link the ideas from their first round of conversation at their home tables to the second conversation. The purpose of the second round of conversation is to encourage people to notice patterns and themes and to identify and record deeper questions. Instruct participants to turn over the poster (you prepared for round one). On the reverse side you will have written the following:

If table conversations get stuck or conflicted, use statements such as the following: “I appreciate what you said about . . .” or “You challenged my thinking when you said . . .” or “I want to better understand your perspective. Tell me . . .” Add to the drawing or writing on the paper at the table if it helps. Ideas and insights will not be organized or even coherent. Make an initial attempt to focus.

Round three: For the third round, participants return to their home tables. Post the following instructions:

Report on what you learned from your conversations at the other tables. Prepare one or two questions or craft a statement designed to sharpen thinking or action. Display your question(s) or statement on flip chart paper provided, writing large enough for others to read from a reasonable distance.²⁹

The plenary session: After three rounds of conversation, the group gathers for a plenary session where the participants share their findings, key insights, and also what the conversations meant to them. Flip chart papers are posted on the walls. At this time the facilitator asks participants to identify the most essential findings from the previous conversations. One table begins and other tables enter the discussion as they have a question or insight that relates. At the end of the

plenary session, determine if there is one overarching question that can take the group to a deeper level, or identify a researchable task or a possibility for action.

All groups contribute to the following questions:

- If there was one thing that hasn't yet been explored but is necessary in order to reach a deeper level of understanding/clarity, what would that be?
- Is there another level of thinking or action we need to address?
- What needs our immediate attention as we move toward our next steps?

Follow-up considerations: Following the plenary, participants may imagine an agenda and focus for continued work on the issue. Participants may be asked to share an idea that they intend to take back to their own contexts. The following questions may assist this phase of the process: Who else do we need in the conversation? What additional perspectives might bring needed insight? Who would benefit from being part of a continuing conversation? What ideas for research and action have emerged? What steps do we need to clarify here in order for these ideas to develop? What examples should we learn more about? How can we learn more about what they are doing?

EXERCISE: Future Present Scenario (FPS)

In most cases, organizations use consultants to help them move from one stage to another. However, in many cases, the consultant is distant from the cultural realities of the organization as a whole and has not had the time to probe adequately the perspectives and dreams and real concerns of organizational members. Many recommendations are in fact statements about what the consultant and a few leaders *presume* is happening in the organization.

The FPS concept is based on having participants in the organization consider the present reality in comparison with an imagined future and to push the limits of what is possible, until their descriptions begin to seem unrealistic or where it would likely be impossible to secure commitment.³⁰

In this exercise, each individual writes his or her own FPS. Members of the various groups in the organization compare their written statements to identify recurring themes, concerns, and possibilities. Participants are asked to consider the following questions: How important are the elements of your description? Just how ideal is it? How much of what you have written is now present? How soon do you want to see your statement happen—immediately? Within six months? Long term? What elements of your statements reveal serious discrepancies between the ideal and the present reality and why?

EXERCISE: Current and ideal states (based on the FPS)

This exercise helps you cast the present reality of your organization against an imagined, though entirely plausible, alternative reality. Identify at least four to five current and ideal states for your organization. For example, "Currently we have a limited understanding of the capabilities of those in our small groups. Ideally, we want to stimulate a commitment to lifelong learning from all those in our small groups." OR "Currently we have a number of leaders who are asking for further training, and we are not quite sure of the next steps. Ideally, we want leaders to be able to equip other leaders."

In light of your list, complete the following task: Develop a future statement of what is possible for your organization or ministry, but write it as if it were already true and happening, now, in the present. Follow these guidelines:

1. Use the present tense and write as if what you are describing is a present reality.
2. Describe the activities, skills, relationships, and organizational structures that were required to bring your organization into this state.
3. Reflect on how you feel living in this new present.
4. Evaluate what you have written: How truly challenging is your statement and in what ways reflective of societal and church realities? To what extent is the statement specific and concrete as opposed to merely general and abstract? In what ways does your statement excite you, inspire you?

EXERCISE: Alert, respond, act

Discuss the following questions as a group:

- What are the characteristics of our society to which we need to be *alert*? What are the characteristics that *you* believe are true of your society? What characteristics do people not familiar with your society seem to notice?
- Beyond being merely alert, because we are Christian, what are the matters to which we must *respond*? What are those things that we ought to have a particular feeling or conviction about?
- Beyond being merely alert, or being attentive to that to which Christians must respond, what are those matters that require *intervention* or *action* now? What do we have to offer as the church in society that will make a difference?

EXERCISE: Identify obstacles that hinder cooperation or partnership

Work through the following questions by describing specific steps that could be taken to minimize hindrances to cooperation or to remove imagined obstacles:

- What sorts of obstacles in your context or organization could be minimized by group effort?
- Which obstacles are insurmountable?
- Which obstacles exist primarily in the minds of members of your organization?

EXERCISE: Looking differently at our problems

The way we talk about a problem or situation is part of the problem. Part of the solution is to talk about it differently. Name two or three of the most frequently talked about problems in your organization.

- What assumptions are present in the way the problems are discussed?
- How might you talk about these problems differently?
- Does thinking differently allow you to view the situation differently?

EXERCISE: Interinstitutional collaboration

Identify obstacles that hinder collaboration or partnership. Identify

- obstacles that could be minimized by group effort;
- obstacles that are insurmountable; and
- obstacles that exist primarily in our minds.

Assuming that it is necessary for various organizations to work together, name specific steps that could be taken to minimize hindrances to collaboration or to remove imagined obstacles.

REFLECTION: Case studies

Ask people to write case studies on issues they believe to be of current importance to the organization. Meet for several days to discuss the cases, looking for patterns and reflecting on action. In the process people are often able to identify blockages. Use open-ended questions rather than yes/no questions. For example,

- What do you perceive happened in this situation? Why?
- How do you feel about . . . ?
- How is this situation or problem similar or different from other situations or problems?
- What do you want to start doing, stop doing, continue doing?
- What went well? What didn't work?
- What happened? Why?
- What will we do differently next time?

REFLECTION: Insights from the stories in Scripture

Many stories in Scripture reveal how people responded to the inevitability of change. Read together Joshua, chapters 3–5. The nation is about to enter the new land. How does Joshua respond to this challenge? What is the nature of the decisions he makes, and how does he prepare the people as they confront change?

It has been observed that a word translatable as “leadership” does not appear in the Greek New Testament. This omission may not be significant, except to underscore that the Scripture’s emphasis is clearly on leaders and not on some abstracted theory of leadership. The more important lessons to be gained from the leaders described in Scripture are found in how they came to understand God’s purposes for the people of God and how they responded—*with considerable variation in style*—to that understanding.

A sampling of resources for further reading

There is so much to read, so much to sift through on the web! The “new” thought or theory becomes the “former perspective” at an ever increasing rate. However, we must read and sift, and read and sift as widely as possible. We won’t and shouldn’t agree with every author’s perspective; but as we wander across the landscape of ideas, patterns will emerge; and we may find that certain enduring principles will begin to take shape in our minds and spirits. The following clusters are more or less pertinent to the theme of this article:

Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008). The book presents a view of leadership that is tied to engagement. Note particularly the last half of the book where the author describes several exercises for group process. This book should be read with Block's earlier book, *The Answer to How is Yes: Acting on What Matters* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2003). Then, add a book that deals explicitly with the necessity of knowing how to ask the right questions: Michael Marquardt, *Leading with Questions: How Leaders Find the Right Solutions by Knowing What to Ask* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008). Even if you are not a pastor, consider this book. In my judgment, the use of ethnography is one of the most critical capacities of the leader. Essentially this book is an introduction in accessible language to the skills of interviewing, eliciting perceptions and stories from people in organizations, recognizing patterns and trends, and learning how to analyze findings for development. Ethnography (or qualitative research) provides the larger framework for the processes and skills that Block and others describe.

An emerging movement in organizations is to allow people to create their narratives or stories and to use these for decision making for evaluation, or just for fun. Storytelling is making a recovery as a way to reveal the dynamics and culture, hopes and fears in organizations. See John Seely Brown, Stephen Denning, Katalina Groh, and Laurence Prusak, *Storytelling in Organizations: Why Storytelling is Transforming 21st Century Organizations and Management* (Jordan Hill, Oxford: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005). This book should be read with books that describe the art of improvisation: for example, Keith Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Patricia Ryan Madson, *Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up* (New York: Bell Tower, Crown Publishing Group, 2005); Mick Napier, *Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004).

Dallas Willard once said that "We are not here to create a community. God is creating a community." Our role, he argued, is "to redeem community by living in the kingdom of God." More pointedly, he went on to say, "When we set out to produce community, I believe that we are stepping into an area where God will not bless. It is one of the great temptations historically to suppose that human beings are capable of creating community."³¹ Joseph R. Myers, *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007) enlarges on Willard's concern for churches and other organizations by discussing the nature of a space where community can be discerned and allowed to flourish. Read this book with Margaret Wheatley's books, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002); and *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2007).

Consider another cluster that deals with the ways we can ride along with change—grasping a moment of opportunity, making an intervention, empowering people to action, and so on: Michael Fullan, *Leading in a Culture of Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001); Moshe Yudkowsky. *The Pebble and the Avalanche: How Taking Things Apart Creates Revolutions* (San Francisco:

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005); David Bornstein, *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas* (London: Oxford, 2007); Ronald Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009); Sharon Daloz Parks, *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2005); Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair*, (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010); and Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

Read two books together and let them “speak” to each other. Begin with Malcolm Warford (ed.), *Revitalizing Practice: Collaborative Models for Theological Faculties* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008). In this book, four faculty members deal with four different issues that affect theological schools: the seminary as an endangered habitat, student learning and formation, listening and learning to teach, and the ministries for which we teach. Each chapter describes a different organizational process that can be implemented by a faculty to engage the issue. In the same year, William Bergquist and Kenneth Pawlak wrote *Engaging the Six Cultures of the Academy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008). The purpose of the book is not to change an institutional culture but rather to work with what exists to accomplish goals. Taken together, the books will stimulate questions about the nature of institutional culture in higher education and suggest processes to work with practices in those cultures.

ENDNOTES

1. Among his many writings, see Charles Handy, *The Hungry Spirit: Beyond Capitalism, a Quest for Purpose in the Modern World* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998).
2. Value Based Management.net, last updated January 7, 2011, accessed March 5, 2011, <http://www.valuebasedmanagement.net/>.
3. James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2004).
4. Jim Collins, *How the Mighty Fall* (Jim Collins Publisher, 2009).
5. Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002).
6. Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman, and Michael Quinn Patton, *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2006).
7. *Ibid.*, 83–84.
8. *Ibid.*, 87.
9. Malcolm L. Warford, ed., *Revitalizing Practice: Collaborative Models for Theological Faculties* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), viii.
10. Note, however, that organisms are not without structure. In fact organisms are as rigidly structured as—or even more so than—machines; their structures are just less obvious. It is a mistake when applying the organic or biological metaphor to focus on the fruit and try to force the production of it. The leader’s role is to ensure that conditions and nutrients exist for the people to grow and to bear fruit.

Adaptive Leadership: Planning in a Time of Transition

11. Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow, *Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2009), 7.
12. See David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005); and Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2003).
13. *Ibid.*, 22–23.
14. Jim Wallis, “Good News About a Bad Economy,” *AARP Bulletin* 51, no. 2 (March 2010): 38.
15. Peter Senge, Bryan Smith, Nina Kruschwitz, Joe Laur, and Sara Schley, *The Necessary Revolution: How Individuals and Organizations are Working Together to Create a Sustainable World* (New York: Doubleday, 2008): 9–10.
16. Linda Cannell, *Theological Education Matters: Leadership Education for the Church* (Chicago: MorgenBooks, 2006). Accessed through Amazon.com.
17. It should also be acknowledged that one of the benefits of institutions that care about knowledge and its use in the development of people, organizations, and societies is that they are expected to be places that allow time for reflection, research, and the working through of different perspectives in communities of learners. Higher education institutions serve human societies well when they do that well. However, when the responsibilities of scholars and the need to preserve, enhance, and use knowledge responsibly and effectively are confused or even equated with particular structures and a limited number of instructional approaches, we get stuck and ineffectiveness results.
18. Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things when Change is Hard* (New York: Broadway Business, 2010).
19. Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 61.
20. A phrase used often by Chris Argyris and Nancy Dixon.
21. To improve question construction, see such resources as Walter Bateman, *Open to Question: The Art of Teaching and Learning by Inquiry* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990); Norah Morgan and Juliana Saxton, *Teaching, Questioning, and Learning* (Routledge, Chapman, Hall Inc., 1991); Neil Browne and Stuart Keeley, *Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2001); Chet Meyers, *Teaching Students to Think Critically* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986); Stephen Brookfield, *Becoming a Critical Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995); Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002); C. Roland Christensen and David Garvin, *Education for Judgment*, ed. Ann Sweet (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1991).
22. Juanita Brown (*The World Café*, 91) tells the story of two different approaches to asking questions in a community development effort: The less dynamic question was “Have you thought about cleaning up the river?” Apart from being the generally unproductive yes/no form, the question would not take the people to useful thinking that leads to action. In this case, the more useful questions were, “What do you see when you look at the river? How do you feel about the condition of the river? How do you explain the situation with the river to your children?” You might be able to frame other or different questions for this situation, but note the effort *not* to ask a question that betrays the agenda of the asker. The question invites the people to make their own judgments about the condition of the river. This approach is more risky for the community

development specialist because it leaves open the possibility that the people will see the problem (and hence possible solutions) differently. But, the reality is that it is most often the people who live with the situation who can see the way through the problem more clearly. The advantage of an outsider's perspective, of course, is when the insider has been blinded by bias, tradition, or familiarity.

23. See David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005); and Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2003).

24. Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination* (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2001): 43.

25. Hallie Preskill and Anne Coghlan (eds). *Using Appreciative Inquiry in Evaluation, New Directions for Evaluation*, no. 100 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

26. See Cooperrider and Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry*; Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*; and David Cooperrider, Diana Whitney, and Jacqueline Stavros, *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005).

27. Juanita Brown with David Isaacs, *The World Café: Shaping our Futures Through Conversations that Matter* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005): 188-189.

28. The World Café is built on seven principles: the setting must support interaction and engagement; the space must be seen as hospitable; questions must be significant enough to stimulate collaborative interaction; everyone's contribution is needed and expected; cross-pollination of ideas and exploration of diverse perspectives is encouraged while at the same time retaining focus on the core questions; participants are helped to listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions; and that which is discovered in the conversations is harvested, shared, and acted upon (*The World Café*, 40).

29. Question prompts such as the following may be suggested if you feel the group needs conversation helps: What did you most appreciate about your conversations at the other tables? What insights were most significant for you? What do we need more clarity about? What elements are missing? What are we not seeing? What assumptions need to be challenged in our thinking about this situation? What one thing that hasn't yet been explored would help us reach a deeper level of understanding or clarity? What deeper question(s) do we need to ask? Is our question(s) significant enough for what we face in our future? See Brown and Isaacs, *The World Café*, 93.

30. For further information see Tojo Thatchenkery, *Appreciative Sharing of Knowledge: Leveraging Knowledge Management for Strategic Change* (Ohio: TAOS Institute Publications, 2005); Nancy M. Dixon, *Common Knowledge: How Companies Thrive by Sharing What They Know* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000).

31. Articulated as part of a Ward Consultation event.

