# **Designing a New Landscape for OD:**

# **The Living Organization**

# By Jeana Wirtenberg

Wherever you find that society is in conflict with nature, choose nature—whatever the cost. You will never be a loser.

#### Osho, 2002

Consider a tree. It produces oxygen. Creates habitat. Stores carbon. Fixes nitrogen. Distills water. Builds healthy soil. Uses the sun's energy to make food. Creates cooling through evaporation. Changes with the seasons. Self-replicates. It's a living, breathing, regenerating, self-sustaining organism existing completely in harmony with nature and other living beings in its natural habitat and its surrounding community.

In stark contrast, for centuries our organizations have largely been built on a machine model. A machine has parts. It has inputs and outputs and people are essentially cogs in the machine. Most importantly, a machine is not alive. It does not generate, regenerate or give life to either its people or the planet. Quite the opposite.

I believe the machine model may have been appropriate for the Industrial Age, but is no longer appropriate for the 21<sup>st</sup> century or beyond. It may be one of the chief reasons underlying the astounding lack of engagement we see in so many organizations today. Indeed, the perpetuation of the machine model is a deadening force with the unintended consequence it can actually kill off the life force in people and the planet.

Here I propose a new model of "the living organization" based on the simple yet elegant symbolic metaphor of a tree (Figure 1). This tree was co-created by a small group of committed OD and sustainability professionals participating in a mini-design summit entitled "Consciousness of Connectedness in the Workplace," spearheaded by Chris Laszlo, Bruce Cryer, and myself, and facilitated by Jim Ludema at Case Weatherhead's "Flourish and Prosper" Global Forum on October 16-17, 2014 in Cleveland, Ohio. Our mini-design summit used the four stage appreciative inquiry process (Laszlo &Brown, 2014, p. 133) over two days. A larger group of about 100 people participating in our mini-design summit broke up into subgroups whose charge was to create ideas for action at the conclusion of the conference. Through this unfolding process, three of the mini-design summit subgroups joined together and blended their ideas to co-create a tree of life representing a life giving, future focused workplace. We co-created a visual plan and template that anyone can use to design and build a flourishing and prospering community or organization. Joining me in this process were Rexford Draman, Mike Echeverria, Paula Gable, Rebecca Marsh, Amy Powell, and Karen Schultz, each of whose contributions are gratefully acknowledged here.

We asked ourselves to consider these important framing questions for our creative process, and our new organization design.

- How can we envision a new future of the organization?
- How can we deconstruct the principles we intuitively understand and believe are necessary for a flourishing organization?
- How can we create greater inclusiveness and broader prosperity for all?
- What does success look like and how can we express that in a flourishing, inspiring, and emotionally evocative way?

We all felt the image of a tree is an appropriate way to symbolize this new type of organization.

**Insert Figure 1 About Here** 

{Caption} Figure 1. The Living Organization as represented by a Tree

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THE LIVING ORGANIZATION

We started out by deciding to look at our living organization holistically and organically. We

wanted to veer away from looking at organizations through the typical lens of the organization

chart with boxes and individual departments, sections, functions, and the inevitable silos that are

so pervasive in organizations today. We thought about different representations that could inspire

a new, more sustainable vision and possibility. This was a challenge, because it forced us to

think outside the box—literally. No more rectangles of rigid hierarchy, confined to paper and

the past. Instead, we wanted to invite the wisdom of nature into the process of envisioning a new,

living system. After considering various options, we came up with the tree as a symbol of this

living collection of human beings working together to realize a shared vision for the future.

Rather than being descriptive or prescriptive, we thought about the power of metaphor to

enroll others in imagining a new way of relating to the world of work. What could be more

organic and holistic than the tree of life as an inspiration to shape a new narrative for business?

Using the tree as a touchstone, we intentionally included design elements that could ultimately

be applied to any organization to help shape a new, flourishing, life giving vision for its future.

The Foundation: Roots and Connection to the Earth

# **Insert Figure 2 About Here**

{Caption:} Figure 2. The Living Organization's Roots and Earth Connection © 2014 Jeana Wirtenberg. Used with permission.

Our living organization is rooted in a deeply embedded foundation, the highly valued and clearly recognizable eco-services that our planet provides. The tree draws nourishment from the soil, which is inextricably interconnected to the planet. The roots of the tree are sourced from this earth energy and help to create an enabling environment for human fulfillment and purpose-driven activity, fueled by shared values, guiding principles, and passionate commitment. This organism is alive, and nurtured by the passion that fills our hearts, our minds, and our lives. Its fervor is captured in the values and principles explicitly designed to support and enable a life giving, life affirming workplace.

**Fulfillment.** In the living organization, ongoing *fulfillment* is a natural expression of our way of being. It is experienced daily by everyone through the way they live their lives and go about their business. Without human fulfillment and that sense of full engagement, no one can flourish. In his recent book "The Purpose Economy," Aaron Hurst quotes an employee of Taproot, a foundation that engages professionals in pro-bono service to drive social change: "Money can't buy the sense of fulfillment one feels knowing that you have invested in the hopes and dreams of others [through organizations such as Taproot]" (Hurst, 2014, p.17).

The ability to experience a state of "Flow" is an essential ingredient of fulfillment. In a state of Flow, a person is fully immersed, energized, and absorbed in what he or she is doing. It is the antithesis of apathy, worry, anxiety, or boredom. In a state of Flow, a person enjoys a high Copyright © 2014 Jeana Wirtenberg Page 4

degree of challenge coupled with the opportunity to apply their strengths and skills to a task.

Through consistent engagement in mindfulness practices, we can intentionally and consciously enter into Flow in our daily experience. In this way, we can produce a state of mental alertness and awareness, full engagement with our work and our world, rather than a bland passivity that is all too common in the workplace today. In organizations, we always have the opportunity to look at the world through fresh eyes. We can confront the facts, however pleasant or unpleasant, discovering our past mistakes and correcting them. It is a constant quest to expand our awareness and understanding, both of the external world, and the world within ourselves.

**Purpose.** Today we see purpose driven organizations emerging in myriad ways in every sector. Leading with purpose has replaced "command and control" as a basic tenet of leadership and management practice. According to Hurst (2014, p. 148), organizations thriving in the purpose economy integrate at least one of these methods into their enterprise: (1) delivering purpose to customers, consumers, or participants, (2) providing purpose to employees, and/or (3) building purpose throughout the supply chain. Daniel Pink speaks of purpose as one of the three essential factors leading to better performance and personal satisfaction: that is, autonomy, mastery, and purpose (Pink, 2011).

Values. Our values keep the organization grounded and allow our people to make the right decisions, even when they are difficult and fraught with seemingly undesirable consequences. We place the highest importance on triple bottom line prosperity to guide our choices. We understand that sustainable values around people, planet, and profits are the lifeblood of the organization. They shape the way we do business, make decisions, and interact with cohabitants of our ecosystem. These sustainable values help keep our workplace rooted in the whole system,

that is, the local community, the larger society, and the earth in its entirety.

We understand that it is just as important to value things that are difficult to measure, as it is to prize those things that are easily measured. We are mindful of Albert Einstein's (attributed) adage that "Not everything that counts can be measured and not everything that can be measured counts."

Our convictions help us commit to our own personal growth, continuous learning, and discovery of new and exciting opportunities, even in the most difficult of circumstances. Our internal radar is tuned to help us constantly seek ways to contribute to our local communities, society, and the world. We are grateful for and understand the profound interdependence we share with others to collaboratively harness the will and take consequent actions to move us forward in a positive direction. We act with mutuality in our interactions with others.

We demonstrate profound respect for all people and precious natural resources. We act with integrity, exhibiting no gap between our espoused values and our values-in-use. We are authentic, because our values are authentic and fully internalized.

**Passion.** Just as sap flows through every branch of a tree, our passion and contagious enthusiasm flow naturally throughout the veins of the vibrant, human organization. Our sustainable organization's vision connects to our hearts as well as to our heads and hands. It is spurred on by deeply felt and widely owned emotional connections to the possibilities we are creating in the world. So it is no coincidence that the fruits of our labor are represented by passion fruit, which we associate with prosperity.

**Principles.** Our guiding principles are informed by and embedded in our values. They are the fundamental truths that serve as the foundation for everything we believe and all that we do. Some of these principles include (adapted from Wirtenberg, 2014, p. 257):

- Building leaderful teams and organizations.
- Seeing the organization as a living system.
- Enabling self-organization and cross-functional teams.
- Unleashing creativity and innovation.
- Sharing information.
- Balancing short-term and long-term views.
- Envisioning the future we want to create.

#### What We Do

# **Insert Figure 3 About Here**

{Caption} Figure 3. The Living Organization: What We Do and How We Do It © 2014 Jeana Wirtenberg. Used with permission.

The trunk of the tree represents "what we do." This is where what we currently call "the work" occurs. But in our model the word "work" is obsolete, as are the words "job," "employees," "associates," and "workers." What we used to call workers are now the people who *co-create* the products and services we deliver. The people we serve used to be called customers or clients ... but in our model, we don't resonate with that concept. Instead, we serve people with fulfillment, purpose, values, principles, and passion and we do things for these people out of our caring, compassion, and love for humanity.

#### How We Do It

Whatever is delivered gets its nourishment through the root system, happens in the core, and Copyright © 2014 Jeana Wirtenberg Page 7

emanates from the people who do it, for the benefit of the people we serve. In the old world, there used to be something called "cutthroat competition" but that has nothing to do with this.

Instead, we collaborate with all our stakeholders inside and outside our organization, especially the people we serve, our partners, our shareholders, and our community.

**Collaboration.** We recognize our inextricable interconnection with each other, and that no one ever truly labors alone. Collaboration is at the very foundation of the trunk of the tree to hold together, solidify and unify all that we do.

# **Insert Figure 4 about Here**

{Caption} Figure 4. The Living Organization's Stakeholders as Branches © 2014 Jeana Wirtenberg. Used with permission.

**Partners.** More often than not, we find that we can't do everything ourselves, inside our finite organization, so we bring in *partners* and suppliers to collaborate with us. Just as the tree is part of a grove of different species of plants, we mindfully share the meadow with other inhabitants. We peacefully coexist and co-create, and we are committed to helping them to flourish as well. To cultivate harmony in this habitat, we make sure our partners share the same guiding principles and values we do, so we're all aligned and moving in the same direction.

Community. We are deeply ensconced in the local communities where we live. We are committed to being responsible citizens and good neighbors by giving back to the community to start and maintain a virtuous cycle. Frequently, we bring in members of the public to help us spawn new products and services for the people we serve. We bring people in all the time to discuss everything. In the context of fulfillment, purpose and passion, it's just "what we do." We Copyright © 2014 Jeana Wirtenberg Page 8

communicate freely and openly with our neighbors, because we know that what affects one of us affects all of us in our tiny alcove, and in the wider world.

**Co-Creators**. As I mentioned above, rather than workers, we have co-creators. The co-creators are like parents who know that they have the duty, joy, and privilege of serving others, and we try hard to never forget our reason for being. It's all about being of assistance to the people who need what we offer. So the purpose of the organization is to meet a real, authentic need experienced by another. And ultimately, it's the people who serve that make up the sustainable business, not some abstract or legalistic entity. In our organizational model, the co-creators' mission is always clear, widely owned, and personally felt. People take pride in their work, just as master gardeners take pride in the gardens in their care.

Systems, Structures, and Processes. To help our co-creators produce what they need to produce, we design and implement systems based on a whole systems approach. To support the whole system, we create trellises of structures and processes so people know what's expected of them. Our way of doing things is communicated completely and frequently in an *information flow* that's multi-directional (up, down and sideways). The exchange of ideas and thinking is always a healthy two-way process. We make it a point to confer with each other all the time, because dialogue and discussion are like a gentle rain that washes away the dust of misunderstandings, cools down overheated terrain, and softens the soil so seeds of new inspiration sprout and grow into trees that eventually bear fruit to be harvested. Each of the branches in our tree represent the stakeholders we are committed to reaching out to including the local community, the broader community we serve, and the global community.

#### **Taking Time for Renewal and Reflection**

In this lovely, shady grove there's always a quiet place for renewal and reflection.

Paula Gable, 2014

**Insert Figure 5 About Here** 

{Caption} Figure 5. Taking Time for Renewal and Reflection

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Because we're so busy doing all this, fueled by passion and expending so much energy,

sometimes we all need to take a break. So we have a hammock suspended from strong boughs

whose leaves cast a welcoming shadow in the heat of a warm day. In our model, the hammock

reminds us to take time for renewal and reflection. Many people find it is during times of restful

reflection that their creativity is ignited by sparks of inspiration. As we lie in our hammock, we

also cultivate gratitude for the opportunity to contribute in meaningful ways to the lives of

people in our community. We are mindful of what we are creating and how we go about creating

it. We remember why we are doing all this and who we are doing it for. And we breathe.

The Fruits of Our Labor: Prosperity=Love

**Insert Figure 6 About Here** 

{Caption} Figure 6. Prosperity as represented by Passion Fruit

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As mentioned above, the fruit of our labor is passion fruit, or fruit of love, which we call

prosperity. Caring for the fruits of our labor produces a feeling of well-being, joy, contentment

and fulfillment which permeates the entire organization. This powers the organization in the same way the beams of light give energy to the leaves, which convert it to nourishment for the tree. Just as sunlight becomes food for the tree, love transformed into service becomes food for the soul.

In our model, the fruits of the trees were originally represented as hearts because hearts represent love. We think that prosperity and love go together. Through our organizations we produce prosperity for all living creatures and the whole planet. We also have growth, renewal, and regeneration. Flowers grow. Fruits are produced. Leaves fall to the earth and are broken down into life-giving nutrients that replenish the soil.

# Being Whole People: Harmony, Music, and Laughter

Those who work in our workplace of the future are like members of a well-rehearsed orchestra with a beautifully blended sound. Members listen attentively and constantly to adjust the pitch and the intensity to be in tune and balance with the ever changing melodies, harmonies and rhythms. "That is why music has so much appeal to the human mind, to the human heart—because sometimes listening to beautiful music, you start slipping into that universal harmony." (Osho, 2002, p.352).

#### **Insert Figure 7 About Here**

{Caption} Figure 7. Music as represented by Bluebirds of Happiness © 2014 Jeana Wirtenberg. Used with permission.

In our organization, we are whole people. Music feeds our soul and accompanies the storyline of Copyright © 2014 Jeana Wirtenberg Page 11

our lives. Music is represented by the little birds singing in our tree. These are bluebirds of happiness which help bring us fulfillment, contentment and even joy.

Gable (2014), one of the co-creators of our tree described it this way:

"We have birds, music, singing, life within the tree —it's a very alive place with light, love, warmth and commitment, and an enduring drive to bring the organization's purpose, values, mission, passion, to life. These guiding principles are not something that's put on a wall and occasionally saluted. We're talking here about wholehearted engagement—body, mind, spirit, it all has to work together to serve the planet, to work within the local community, and to be a source of renewal and strength."

And in our organization, we always remember to have fun. "Laughter is the easiest thing in the world if you allow it, but it has become hard" (Osho, 2011, p. 7).

**Spirituality: Our Source of Inspiration** 

**Insert Figure 8 About Here** 

{Caption} Figure 8. Spirituality: Our Source of Inspiration © 2014 Jeana Wirtenberg. Used with permission.

The source of energy for the organization is represented by the sun in the sky. The rays of the sun support photosynthesis, which feeds the organic structure that produces leaves that fall to the earth to further nurture the tree. In this way, nature has devised a continual feedback loop in every direction. It's a brilliant design, indeed!

The source of power and inspiration for our organization is our spirituality. We are nourished by it and draw on it to enrich the organization and create a wider sense of well-being for all our people. At the pinnacle of our framework is a connection to whatever spirituality is for you— the divine, the source, God— it's the universal force that's in every one of us. It's what Chris Laszlo (2014) calls an energy field and a connective tissue force we don't see but we know is there.

# **The Community**

As we see in Figure 1, the organization, as represented by the tree, is within a grove with many other members of the tree community. We understand that we have many types, sizes, and generations of trees [and organizations] in this community of ours. It's truly a flourishing, diverse and inclusive environment unlike any we may have recognized before. Surprisingly, while we may never have noticed it before, these sorts of habitats already exist in nature, are ubiquitous, and happening all around us. Now that we're mindful we are able to see and begin to emulate them.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR OD PRACTITIONERS

A well told story can drive change, inspire innovation, stimulate more sales, foster collaboration, re-brand a company, incite viral advocacy for a mission or cause, generate more effective management and help overcome resistance.

#### Peter Guber, 2011

Here I have presented a parable which, if fully leveraged, can help usher in a new landscape for OD practitioners. I invite my OD colleagues to use it in some of the ways described below to help build healthier, more sustainable, and flourishing organizations. The metaphors embedded in the tree can be used to ignite a new conversation in every organization—large, medium and Copyright © 2014 Jeana Wirtenberg Page 13

small—and ultimately to design a new landscape for the field of OD itself.

Peter Guber, author of "Tell to Win," and Hollywood producer, executive, and entrepreneur, builds a compelling case that telling purposeful stories is an organization's most under-utilized competency. "Magic happens when you narrate otherwise soulless data into emotional nodes that render an experience to an audience—that makes the information inside the story memorable, resonant and actionable" (Guber, 2011, p.4).

And as Michael Margolis points out, "people have stopped believing in the same old stories—especially when it comes to inspiring, motivating or mandating change." (Margolis, 2011, p. 6). Today leaders increasingly are operating in an environment of extreme cynicism, suspicion and mistrust. I believe this new model may provide the framework and impetus to allow people to locate themselves in an inspiring and positive new story. OD practitioners have the opportunity to socialize a new story into reality by showing it's already happening in nature, and how, by working together to co-create a new future, it will make everyone's life better.

In this context, OD practitioners and HR visionaries can play a pivotal and essential role in creating flourishing, sustainable organizations by:

- Disseminating and sharing this new model of "The Living Organization"
- Customizing the model to make it their own
- Engaging leaders, managers, employees, suppliers, and communities to bring it to life in their own organizations.

# **OD Process: Create Your Living Organization**

Stories are indeed the currency of human interaction and bonding, and as such can have a powerful effect in changing beliefs, attitudes, actions and behaviors.

Alison Esse, 2011, p. 7

The process I'm suggesting is simple, and easily doable for seasoned OD practitioners. Use this chapter as a team building and strategic planning exercise. Have a cross-functional team from your organization come together to imagine a new reality into being. Ask the participants to read this chapter and when they come to the session, have them watch the accompanying video on the BPI website.

Design a full day session to have shared table conversations and large group deep dialogues about every aspect in each of the figures. Look at everything you do through the lens of the living organization. Have the participants co-create and draw your own tree to capture the heart, soul, and spirit of your own organization.

#### **Craft a New Business Narrative**

Inside every company is a story. Finding it and telling it well is an investment that is well worth it. A great inside story helps to define the company as an employer, helps people know what is expected of them, the standards that have been set and the reasons it's different than its competitors. A great story can hold the right people and lure the best people.

Based on what you have created, have participants collaborate to co-create and craft a new business narrative for your organization. Then iterate it until everyone is excited about and fully engaged in the future they have begun to design. Play music. Invite laughter. Encourage creativity and intellectual risk-taking. Celebrate successes. Share credit. Help everyone see themselves in the picture.

#### **Discussion Questions**

Here are suggested discussion questions to help guide your conversations:

- 1. What metaphors or symbols can we use to depict our own Living Organization?
- 2. How do we relate to and support the earth in our Living Organization?
- 3. What should we include in the roots of our Living Organization?
- 4. How can we describe the work we do in our Living Organization?
- 5. Who are the stakeholders in the branches of our Living Organization?
- 6. What are the systems, structures, and processes we need to include in our Living Organization?
- 7. Where and how do we take time for reflection and renewal in our Living Organization?
- 8. How do we ensure that we have harmony, music, and laughter in our Living Organization?
- 9. Where do we find our inspiration and how do we include spirituality in our Living Organization?

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# **Biography**

<u>Jeana Wirtenberg</u> helps companies and organizations make sustainability a mainstream, routine business practice. She is an expert on the leadership, organizational dynamics, and psychology required to make that happen.

Jeana is president and CEO of <u>Transitioning to Green</u>. Her company develops individual and organizational capacity to make sustainability take root. Working with CEO's, Presidents and VP's of Fortune 500 companies, Jeana helps bring about new levels of organization and individual capability, leadership, cultural transformation and business success.

Her new book <u>Building a Culture for Sustainability: People, Planet and Profits in a New Green Economy</u> shows how to holistically integrate sustainability throughout the culture of organizations. She teaches Employees and Organizations/HR in Bard College's MBA in Sustainability Program, Organization Behavior in Rutgers MBA program, and Women Leading in Business at Rutgers University. Jeana has held senior organization development and HR positions in AT&T and PSEG. She serves on the leadership team of the <u>OD Collaborative for a Flourishing World</u>, and was Organization Effectiveness articles editor for <u>HR People & Strategy</u> from 2007 to 2015.

For up to date list of articles by Jeana Wirtenberg go to this link:

https://www.jeanawirtenberg.com/articles---press.html

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