Creating Greatness in the Realm Beyond Systems Thinking

by Jack Martin Leith

This is my contribution to the e-book distributed to participants in European Sharing on Systems Thinking, held in Prague, Czech Republic, 18–20 June 2015.

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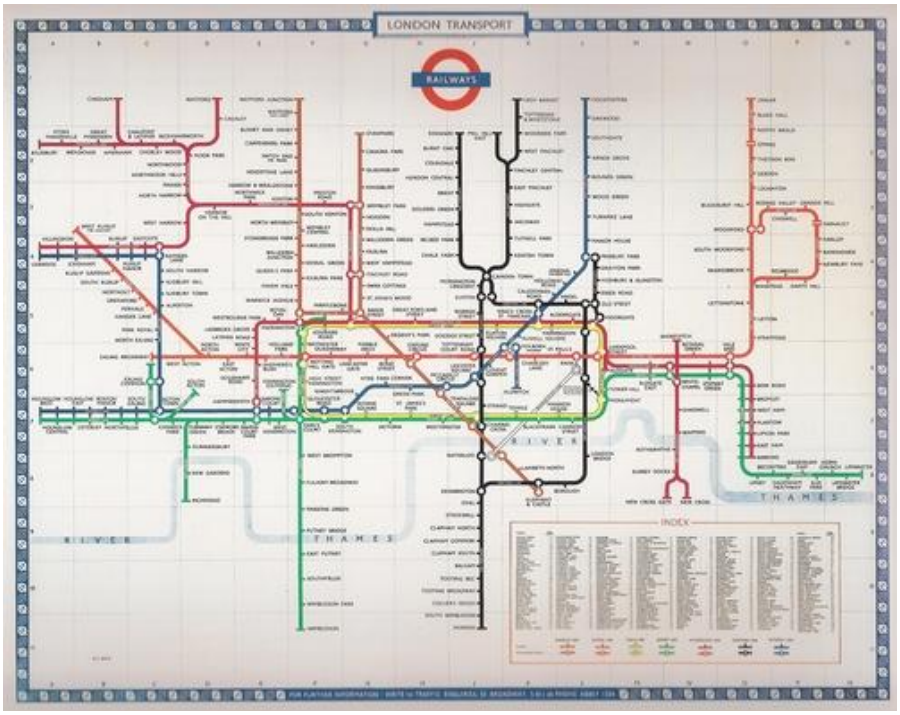
Growing up in an east London funeral parlour during the 1950s, I was acutely aware of what I came to call the enterprise ecosystem. *[Note: I now call this the beneficiary set.]*

The shop where I spent my childhood was later demolished to make way for a roundabout. This is the replacement shop at 52 Ripple Road, Barking.

In this particular case, the ecosystem was a rich one. It consisted of the bereaved; the people who supplied B. Wallis & Son with timber for the coffins, and marble and granite for the headstones; the staff of various cemeteries and crematoria; the coroner's officers and other officials; my father, who managed the shop and did a bit of everything; my mother, who arranged the funerals; other employees, who made coffins, embalmed the deceased, served as pall bearers, drove the hearse and performed other vital tasks; Mr. Cakebread, the part-time bookkeeper; and the man they called "the guvnor"—Mr Wallis himself, the 'Son' in the firm's name.

Arranging a funeral is far from simple, and all of these people, some of whom would drink tea with us at our kitchen table, had to work together in order to make the overall experience the best it can be, given the difficult circumstances. There's no service business quite like an undertaker's. You can't take away people's pain, but you can show them human kindness. Yes, B Wallis & Son was a business, but it also provided a service to the community. Stan Wallis and his team pursued commercial and social aims together, without compromise.

My interest in systems became apparent very early. A shy introvert and something of a geek, I was fascinated by the workings of the London underground railway and wanted one of those big colourful system maps you see displayed on the walls of tube stations. These weren't available to the public in the 1950s, but London Transport published a free pocket-size version, and Mr. Wallis helped me create a scaled-up map on a large sheet of paper using a ruler and a pair of dividers. This was probably the point at which I became a systems thinker.



London Underground system diagram, 1959 edition.

Around that time I was given the job of librarian at my junior school. The first thing I did on taking up this prestigious appointment was to carry out a reorganisation. The stock of books was catalogued and rearranged, a new system for borrowing and returning books was introduced, and new opening hours came into effect. Blissfully unaware of the benefits of co-creation, I simply thought up the new system and announced it on a hand-drawn poster.

After passing the 11-plus exam, I became a boarder at a grammar school in rural Essex, some 40 miles from my funeral parlour home. It wasn't long before I discovered how to make long-distance calls from the village phone box for the price of a local call. I kept the boarding house bullies at bay by providing them with a very long routing code that enabled them to phone home for next to nothing. And so the systems thinker and systems designer became a systems hacker.

Several decades later, a friend introduced me to two of Gregory Bateson's books: *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972), and *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity—Advances in Systems Theory, Complexity & the Human Sciences* (1979). I had long been on a quest to discover the truth about the nature of value and how it is created, how the new comes into being, how this changes into that, and how we can create organisations that enrich the world by generating maximum value for customers and other beneficiaries. These books enabled me to make significant progress. My enquiries took me into many new realms, including cybernetics, epistemology (how we know what we know), second order change, large group interventions, metamorphology, Taoism, Zen, Toltec wisdom, and other weird and wonderful fields of knowledge.

In 1988 I travelled to Stockholm to take part in the Sixth Annual Symposium on Organization Transformation. This was what's now called an unconference: a participant-led event with no invited speakers and no preset agenda. Over the course of three days I experienced the Open Space Technology format that Harrison Owen had devised just three years earlier, and it gave my professional life a new focus.

On returning to the UK, I began a new career as an Open Space facilitator, later relocating to Amsterdam, where I established The Centre for Large Group Interventions. CLGI's services were commissioned by a variety of companies, government institutions and non-profit organisations who wished to bring about breakthrough innovation and whole system change

with the help of Open Space Technology, Future Search, Real Time Strategic Change, and similar methods. The systems thinker, designer and hacker had evolved into a systems intervener and advocate.

In this article I will be sharing some of my discoveries about innovation, change and value creation, and presenting them in the form of propositions. Some of these run counter to prevailing theories, models and practices, and your deeply held beliefs may be challenged. Should this happen, I suggest that you to put your beliefs on hold, keep an open mind, suspend judgement, play with the idea, explore its value-generating potential, and—most importantly—remain curious.

"**If you gave me a few seconds to share what I believed could add the most to a person's life I'd say 'be curious'. What about? Everything and everyone. When you're curious, every day is rich.**" Dionne Lew , in The value of being curious in the modern world, on Medium.

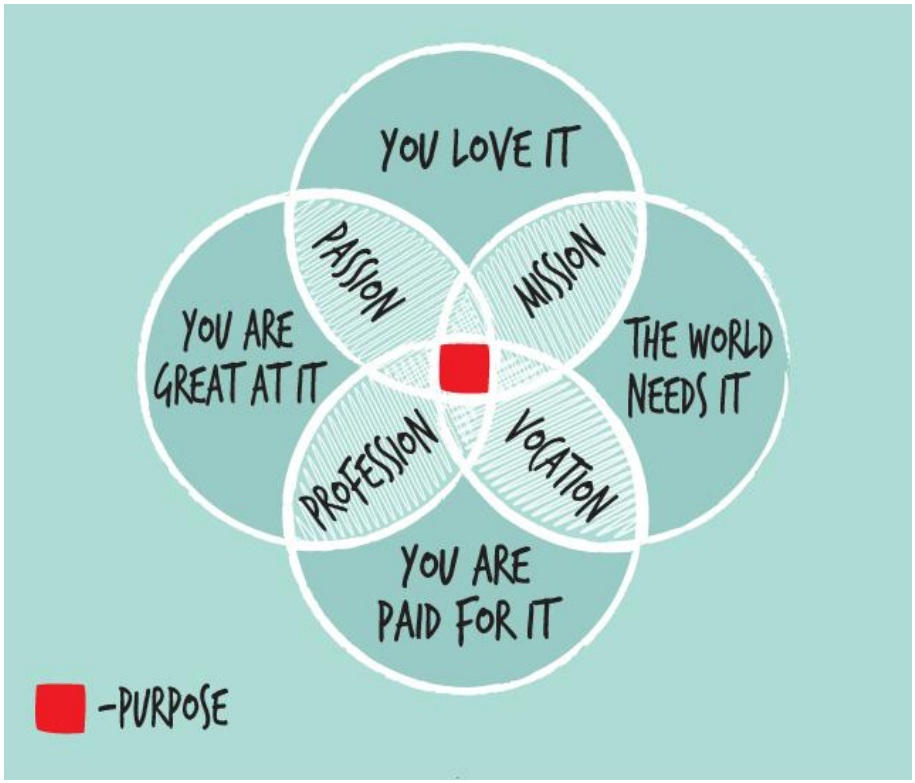
The many quotes included in the article show that others are thinking along similar lines, point to sources of additional information, and provide material that you might want to incorporate into future presentations about innovation, change and value creation.

That completes the context-setting material. Now it's time to dive into the content, which takes the form of 14 propositions.

What is the purpose of human existence?

Most people are in one of three camps when asked about human purpose. In the first camp it's all about them. They talk about learning life's lessons and fulfilling their potential. People in the second camp say it's about making the world a better place. Those in the third camp insist that life has no purpose.

If you are in the second camp and want to get specific about your purpose, you might find the following diagram useful.



xProposition 1: We are here to enrich the world.

"**You are not here merely to make a living. You are here in order to enable the world to live more amply, with greater vision, with a finer spirit of hope and achievement. You are here to enrich the world, and you impoverish yourself if you forget the errand.**"

Woodrow Wilson, US President 1913 –1921

These words form the basis of my personal philosophy and underpin my professional work.

What is an enterprise for?

Proposition 2: An enterprise exists to enrich the world.

An enterprise exists to create value and make a contribution to society—to enrich the world, thereby enriching itself as a natural consequence.

In a speech given to Hewlett Packard managers in 1960, the firm's co-founder David Packard said "**We inevitably comes to the conclusion that a group of people get together and exist as an institution that we call a company so they are able to accomplish something collectively which they could not accomplish separately. They are able to do something worthwhile—they make a contribution to society (a phrase which sounds trite but is fundamental).**"

And as Lou Gerstner, IBM's former chairman and CEO, states in his book *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance*: "**In the end, an organization is nothing more than the collective capacity of its people to create value.**"

What is value?

Proposition 3: There are three main types of value: economic, abstract, and experienced.

Economic value means money, which comes in the form of revenue and profit for a business, and in the shape of donations, grants and bequests for a charity. However:

"**Prosperity in human societies can't be properly understood by looking just at monetary measures, such as income or wealth. Prosperity in a society is the accumulation of solutions to human problems. These solutions run from the prosaic (crunchier potato chips) to the profound (cures for deadly diseases).**"

Source: Redefining capitalism, by Eric Beinhocker and Nick Hanauer, in McKinsey Quarterly, September 2014.

Harvard Business School professor and strategy exponent Michael Porter has revised his ideas about the nature of value:

"**Companies must take the lead in bringing business and society back together. The recognition is there among sophisticated business and thought leaders, and promising elements of a new model are emerging. Yet we still lack an overall framework for guiding these efforts, and most companies remain stuck in a 'social responsibility' mind-set in which societal issues are at the periphery, not the core.**

The solution lies in the principle of shared value, which involves creating economic value in a way that also creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges. Businesses must reconnect company success with social progress. Shared value is not social responsibility, philanthropy, or even sustainability, but a new way to achieve economic success. It is not on the margin of what companies

do but at the center. We believe that it can give rise to the next major transformation of business thinking."

Source: Creating Shared Value, by Michael E. Porter and Mark R. Kramer, in Harvard Business Review, January-February 2011.

Abstract value is typically seen in value propositions and purpose statements, or scribbled on Post-it Notes during a workshop session. Examples include refreshment, comfort, safety, convenience, and ease of use. Linguists call this kind of a word a nominalisation: the verb 'to feel comfortable' has been converted into an abstract noun, 'comfort'.

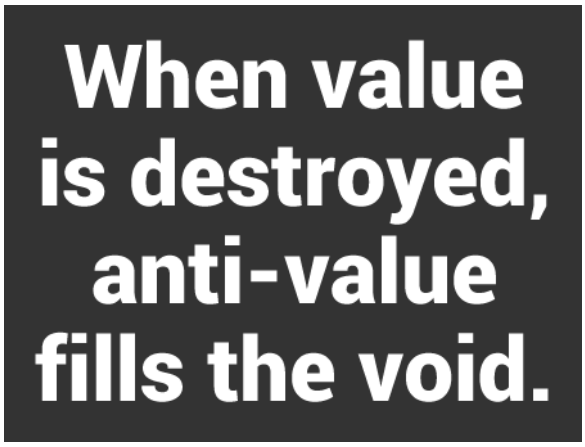
Experienced value is not something you can handle, like a five pound note, nor is it a vague concept such as refreshment. Imagine this: It's a hot day. You are thirsty. You buy a can of beer. You remove the ring-pull and take a swig. Whatever happens next in your sensory system (if it's a positive experience) is what I'm calling experienced value. It's utterly subjective, and cannot be expressed in words.

Anti-value

Proposition 4: The converse of value is anti-value.

Imagine that you take a swig of beer and it tastes vile. You are now experiencing what I call ‘anti-value’.

Anti-value is more than dissatisfaction. It manifests as an experience of physical pain or emotional upset arising from a poorly designed or malfunctioning value generator (the can of beer, in our example), or from the denial of previously received and possibly taken-for-granted value.



Anti-value often spawns further anti-value. For example, a woman cuts herself when opening a packaged product. She feels physical pain, irritation and regret, and the emotions escalate into anger. The inadequate packaging has now generated considerable anti-value and evoked a negative brand experience.

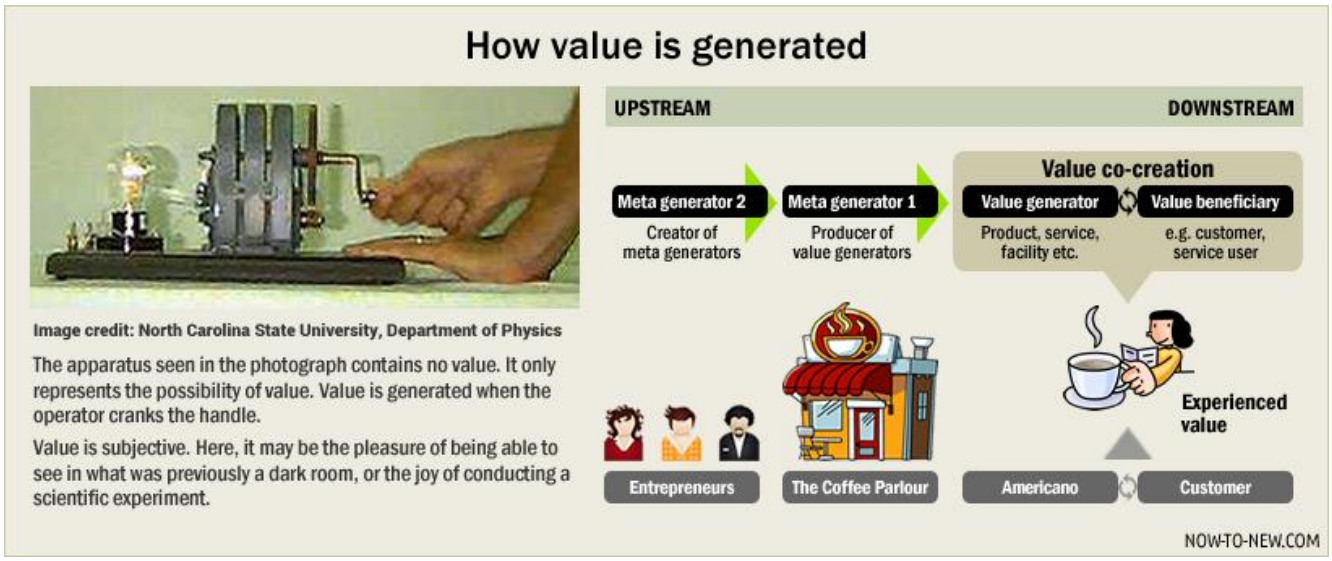
Fast forward to the next purchase occasion. The woman chooses a different brand, not because it promises greater value, but because she wants to avoid the anti-value she received from the first brand.

Increasingly, collective anti-value is being returned to its perpetrator in the form of badwill.

Enterprises wishing to maximise downstream value generation must root out and eliminate any generators of significant anti-value such as the packaging described earlier.

How is value created?

Proposition 5: Value is co-created through the interaction between the value beneficiary (e.g. consumer, user) and the value generator (product, service etc.) It does not reside inside a product, waiting to be delivered as if by Deliveroo.



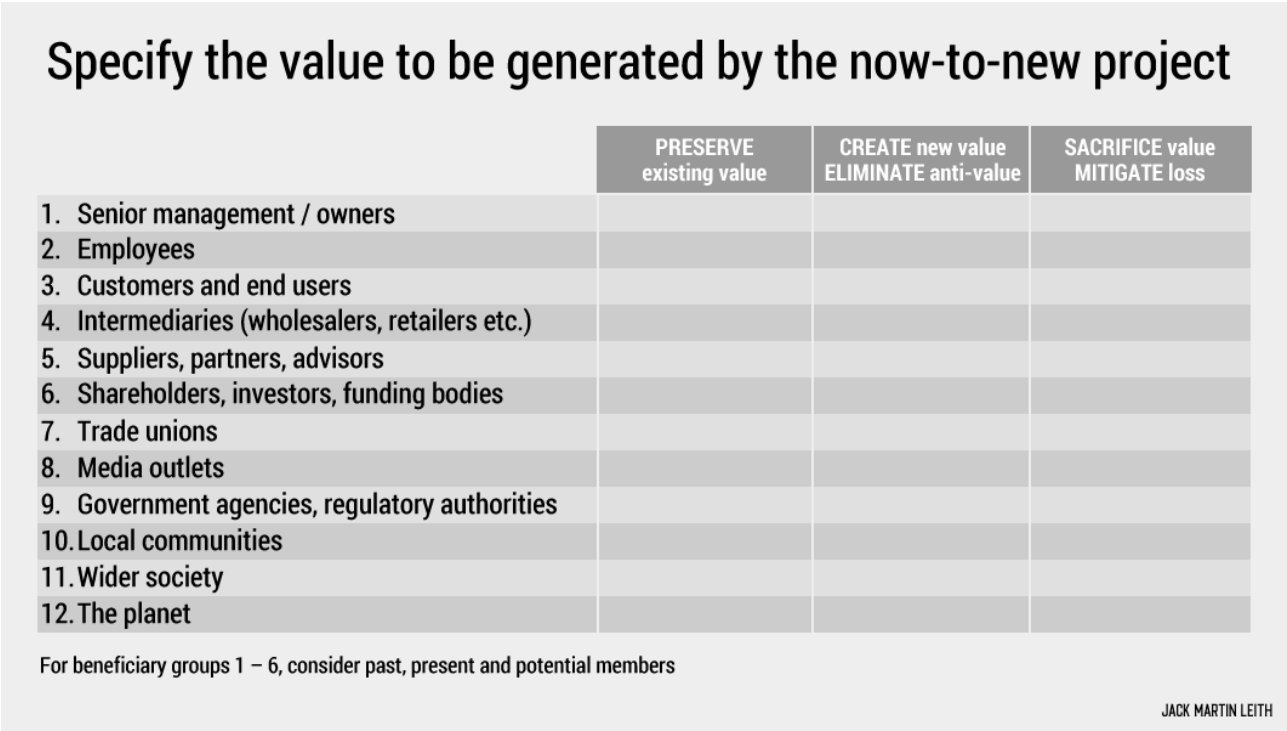
If you would like to know more about value co-creation, I recommend Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing (pdf), a groundbreaking paper written by Stephen Vargo and Robert Lusch, and published in Journal of Marketing, Vol. 68 (January 2004).

Creating value for all potential beneficiaries

Proposition 6: Greatness-creating enterprises seek to generate maximum value for all beneficiaries — not just favoured groups such as customers and investors.

The value specification process enables those embarking on a now-to-new (innovation, change etc.) project to consider each beneficiary group and determine:

- What existing value must be preserved.
- What new value might be created.
- What anti-value generation should be halted.
- What value must be sacrificed for the good of the whole. When value is sacrificed in this way, the consequent generation of anti-value must be foreseen and mitigated, and those experiencing the anti-value may need some form of compensation.



Creating the specification is a searching enquiry and not a form-filling exercise. The completed value specification forms part of the creative brief for the programme of work that is to be undertaken. We will return to this topic later.

What is greatness?

In the table below, I contrast the term ‘great’ with its counterpart, ‘mediocre’ (original meaning: halfway up the mountain).

Mediocre	Great
Unremarkable	Remarkable or outstanding in magnitude, degree, or extent[1]
Insignificant; solves trivial human problems	Of outstanding significance or importance[1]; solves significant human problems
Good enough	Superior in quality[1]
Self-serving	Altruistic

Note 1 | Source: American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition.

In the enterprise realm, this translates into the set of attributes shown here:

The mediocre enterprise	The great enterprise
Looks after its own needs and interests	Contributes to the greater good
Service is reciprocal: trading favours, mutual back-scratching and quid pro quo arrangements	Service is non-reciprocal and unconditional, motivated by a deeply-felt desire to enrich the world
Employees' actions are informed by an enterprise-focused vision and a strategy aimed at securing a competitive advantage	Employees' actions are informed by a humanity-serving purpose, brought to life through vision (of realised potential), strategy and mission
Employees lack the capabilities demanded by the strategy	Employees possess the capabilities required for accomplishing the mission
Seeks to create value for customers and shareholders	Seeks to create maximum value for all beneficiaries
Satisfies functional needs of customers/users (enables 'jobs to be done')	Creates meaningful and joyous experiences (holidays, cinema visits and romantic dinners, for example, are not 'jobs to be done')
Leadership is limited to senior executives	Leadership is pervasive
Bureaucracy is present in great measure	Bureaucracy is absent
Oppressive ambiance	Vibrant ambiance
Employees are treated as instruments of management	Employees are recognised as autonomous creators
Conversations are mainly routine	Conversations are mainly generative (directed towards downstream value generation)
Work is soul destroying	Work is purposeful, meaningful, life affirming
Change work is slow and often ineffective; it evokes so-called resistance	Change work is quick and effective; it evokes a desire to collaborate and create that which generates maximum downstream value
Weak ability to flourish in a complex world	Strong ability to flourish in a complex world
Stagnation eventually sets in	Undergoes constant renewal
Allows anti-value generation to persist	Roots out and arrests the generation of anti-value
Fails to realise value generation potential	Realises value generation potential

Do great enterprises exist?

Based on the attributes listed above, it's hard to identify enterprises that create greatness, particularly in the business arena.

Here are some that have considerable merit:

Disney Provides memorable experiences.

Apple Groundbreaking design and a great user experience.

Cirque du Soleil Transformed people's experience of circus, on a global scale.

SAS (Special Air Service) The best of the best.

Wikipedia It has its flaws, but how did we ever manage without it?

Glastonbury Festival Michael Eavis invented the festival experience as we know it here in the UK.

Nowhere A small but influential innovation practice that punches well above its weight.

BBC No other broadcasting company comes close.

In an enterprise, what is the rationale for creating greatness?

- By enriching all beneficiary groups, the enterprise strengthens its viability and makes its long-term future more secure.
- The best talent is attracted and retained.
- Employees' creative potential is released.
- People give of their best, because their work has meaning and purpose.
- The reputation of the enterprise is enhanced.
- A distinctive and respected corporate brand arises.
- Competitive advantage is boosted. In his book *What Matters Now*, Gary Hamel states "Mediocrity is a competitive liability."
- More value, in the form of revenue, cordial relationships, goodwill etc, is created for the enterprise as a natural consequence of enriching the beneficiary set.
- Shareholder value increases.

Why is greatness so elusive, when there are extraordinary people such as these inventing new management theory and practice?

Juanita Brown and David Isaacs (World Café)

Gervase Bushe and Robert Marshak (Dialogic Organization Development)

Clayton Christensen (Disruptive Innovation)

David Cooperrider (Appreciative Inquiry)

Gerard Endenburg (Sociocracy)

Jon Husband (Wirearchy)

Barry Johnson (Polarity Management)

Jake Jacobs (Real Time Strategic Change)

Frederic Laloux (Teal Organizations)

Alex Osterwalder (Business Model Canvas)

Harrison Owen (Open Space Technology)

Brian Robertson (Holacracy)

Simon Robinson and Maria Moraes Robinson (Holonomics)

Otto Scharmer (Theory U / Presencing)

Stephen Vargo and Robert Lusch (Service-Dominant Logic)

Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff (Future Search)

James Wilk (Minimalist Intervention)

And why is greatness so elusive, despite more than 30 years of dedicated activism?

In the organisational realm there has been no shortage of movers and shakers during the past three decades, or collaborative gatherings in which such people created visions, shared ideas, and hatched plans. Here are some notable events:

1983 First International Symposium on Organization Transformation (OT1). The worldwide OT network spawned two books (Transforming Work and Transforming Leadership), the trailblazing consultancy nowhere, and the Open Space conferencing format. The final OT conference (OT24), held in Hawai'i , took place in 2006.

1987 From Organization to Organism conference, hosted by Findhorn Foundation, UK.

1987 World Business Academy launched.

2001 The Agile Alliance creates the Agile Manifesto.

2007 Brian Robertson and Tom Thomison establish HolacracyOne. Read about Holacracy on Wikipedia

2008 Half Moon Bay conference, which gave rise to Gary Hamel's Harvard Business Review article Moon Shots for Management and the creation of Management Innovation eXchange.

2014 Publication of Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness by Frederic Laloux.

2019 Business Roundtable releases a new "Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation." Signed by nearly 200 chief executive officers including Amazon's Jeff Bezos, Apple's Tim Cook, General Motors' Mary Barra and Oracle's Safra Catz, the group seeks to "move away from shareholder primacy," a concept that had existed in the group's principles since 1997, and move to "include commitment to all stakeholders."

So why does greatness continue to be elusive?

Proposition 7: A set of powerful constraints inhibits the shift from mediocrity to greatness.

This set of constraints includes:

- Obsolete worldviews
- Faulty theories, concepts and models
- Erroneous beliefs
- Flawed metaphors
- Cognitive biases
- Restrictive rules
- Social norms
- Custom and practice
- Fear

These and other constraints form part of what I call ‘the wall’, acting as a barrier between how we *think* the universe works—for example, how the new comes into being, and how this changes into that—and how the universe *really* works.

Getting closer to the truth about how the new comes into being

The following graphic shows some innovation and change approaches and methodologies that have emerged since the 1960s. We will never be able to fully explain how the new comes into being, and how this changes into that. But as our understanding increases, so our innovation and change work becomes more effective.

“The problems in the world stem from the difference between how we think and how the world works.” Gregory Bateson

“There seems to be an endless stream of thought leaders and consultants who claim to have engineered a more “scientific” approach to business. Yet they, just like the positivists, always seem to fall short. Unfortunately, the real world defies logic.”
Greg Satell, Why Business Defies Logic

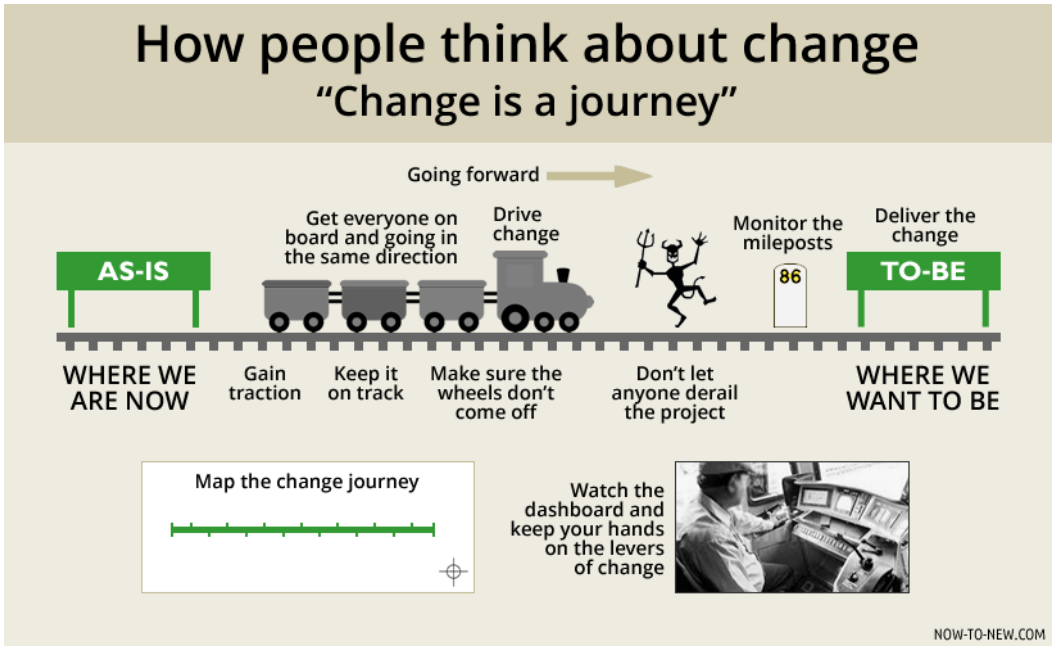
Some of the erroneous beliefs and flawed metaphors that inhibit the shift from mediocrity to greatness

1. Resistance to change is a fact of life. Not true. The concept of resistance to change in the organisational realm was conceived by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s and subsequently misinterpreted. People are not “resisting change”. They are expressing their displeasure that the strategy, change initiative or innovation endeavour is designed in such a way that it generates anti-value for them. In these circumstances, the anti-value that people experience arises from a loss—usually of status, rewards or personal capability.

“**This article examines the origins of one of the most widely accepted mental models that drives organizational behavior: The idea that there is resistance to change and that managers must overcome it. This mental model, held by employees at all levels, interferes with successful change implementation. The authors trace the emergence of the term resistance to change and show how it became received truth. Kurt Lewin introduced the term as a systems concept, as a force affecting managers and employees equally. Because the terminology, but not the context, was carried forward, later uses increasingly cast the problem as a psychological concept, personalizing the issue as employees versus managers. Acceptance of this model confuses an understanding of change dynamics. Letting go of the term — and the model it has come to embody — will make way for more useful models of change dynamics.**”

Source: Challenging ‘Resistance to Change’, by Eric B. Dent and Susan Galloway Goldberg, The George Washington University, in Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, Vol. 35 No. 1, March 1999 25-41.

2. Change is a journey from the current state of affairs to the desired state. No, it’s not. There is no ‘here’, no ‘there’, and no ‘journey’. This is simply a metaphor—one that limits our ability to bring our desired present (not desired future) into being quickly, easily and with certainty.



3. In order to produce a good idea you must first generate a lot of ideas. This may be true if you rely solely on synthetic imagination. However, people who are open to creative imagination produce and develop just one idea: one that will ultimately enrich the world. I will say more about synthetic imagination and creative imagination in a moment.

4. Management must engage employees. Given that engagement programmes continue to be spectacularly ineffective (according to Gallup, only 13% of employees worldwide are engaged at work), why don't enterprises simply abolish them?

The answer is, in part, because so many people—such as organisation development consultants, survey firms and software vendors—have too much invested in the engagement paradigm. When the efficacy of employee engagement work is challenged, they answer: "If it's not working, it's because you're doing it wrong."

Trying to engage a person is like trying to dance them. It cannot be done. The engagement model is fundamentally flawed. It will never work. Gary Hamel puts his finger on it in this excerpt from his book *The Future of Management*:

"**If there was a single question that obsessed 20th century managers, from Frederick Taylor to Jack Welch, it was this: How do we get more out of our people? At one level, this question is innocuous—who can object to the goal of raising human productivity? Yet it's also loaded with industrial age thinking: How do we (meaning 'management') get more (meaning units of production per hour) out of our people (meaning the individuals who are obliged to follow our orders)? Ironically, the management model encapsulated in this question virtually guarantees that a company will never get the best out of its people. Vassals and conscripts may work hard, but they don't work willingly.**"

5. All creativity is combinatorial.

Proposition 8: Truly original ideas with the potential to enrich the world come to us by means of creative imagination, and not through synthetic imagination, which produces derivative ideas and mediocrity.

The process of combining existing ideas to create a new one is a product of synthetic imagination. This is described by Napoleon Hill in his classic book, Think and Grow Rich (free pdf of entire book), and contrasted with creative imagination:

"**Through the faculty of synthetic imagination, one may arrange old concepts, ideas, or plans into new combinations. This faculty creates nothing. It merely works with the material of experience, education, and observation with which it is fed. It is the faculty used most by the inventor, with the exception of he who draws upon the creative imagination, when he cannot solve his problem through synthetic imagination.**

Through the faculty of creative imagination, the finite mind of man has direct communication with Infinite Intelligence. It is the faculty through which 'hunches' and 'inspirations' are received. It is by this faculty that all basic, or new ideas are handed over to man."

I collect quotes from people who have experienced the power of creative imagination at work. Here are some of them:

> **David Arnold** is a British film composer best known for scoring five James Bond films, the 1994 film Stargate, the 1996 film Independence Day, and the cult television series Little Britain, and who was appointed Musical Director for the 2012 Olympic Games and the 2012 Paralympic Games in London. During an appearance on the BBC Breakfast show, he was asked how he goes about composing music. He replied "You walk around with your aerials out and it gets delivered to you. It's more about feeling it than thinking about it."
>
> **Marianne Elliott-Said** (Poly Styrene) said "I just channel my songs like a medium." Source: The Guardian, 27 April 2011.
>
> **Ian Rankin** said "I'm not really in control at all of what I'm writing. It's almost as though before I start writing there's a shape sitting there that I've not seen yet, and when I start to write the novel the shape will reveal itself to me, the novel will decide which way it wants to go." Source: The Guardian, 26 March 2011.
>
> **Lionel Richie** was asked "Where do your melodies come from?" He replied: "I wish I knew. It's like radio stations playing in my head. I'm in the shower singing along to this great song, and then I stop one moment and go, 'Hey, it's not on the radio.' What's frightening about it is I'm not singing a song, I'm singing along with the song that's playing in my head." Source: Deseret News, 31 January 1993.

Bryan Ferry was asked by the singer and radio presenter Cerys Matthews about his approach to songwriting. He said “When you get it right, it’s like someone is writing it for you.” Source: BBC Radio 6 Music, 30 December 2012.

Worldviews: mechanistic thinking, systems thinking and beyond

A worldview is an individual’s set of fundamental beliefs and organising principles; his or her unquestioned assumptions about the nature of reality and the human place in it. A worldview is like the operating system in a computer, controlling operations behind the scenes but mostly outside the user’s awareness. When someone upgrades his or her worldview, certain things that were previously impossible become possible, and some things that were difficult become easy.

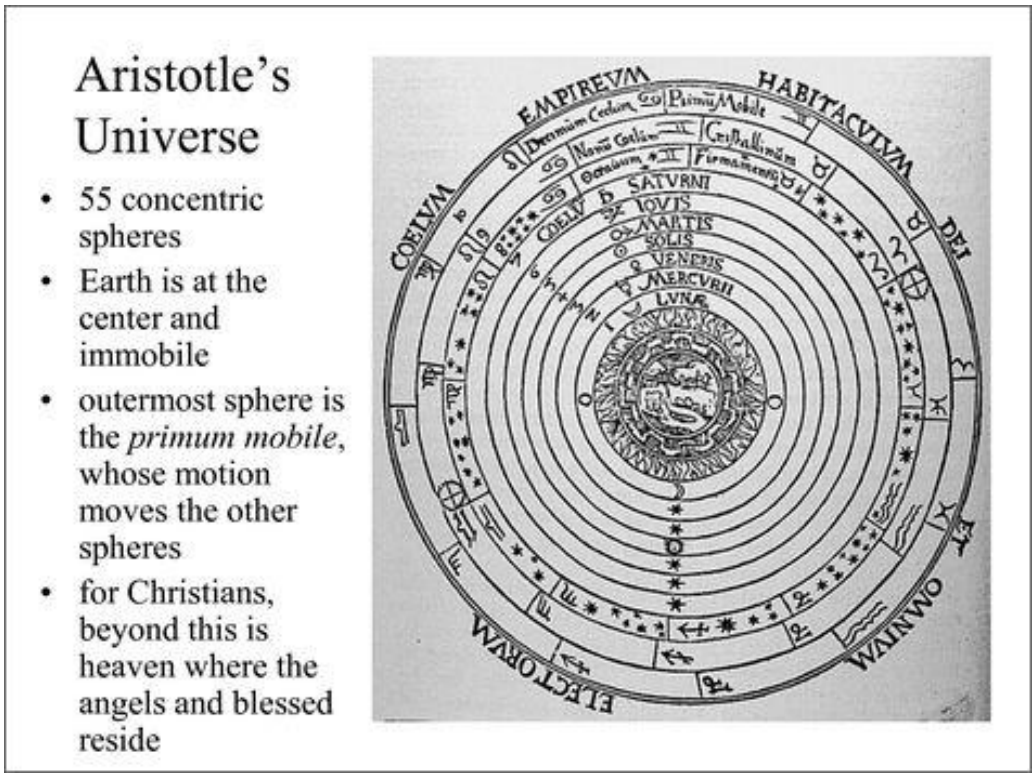
This is how worldviews have evolved in the western world during the past 2,000 years:

Aristotelian-Ptolemaic	Newtonian-Cartesian	Pre-systemic	Systemic	Post-systemic

Aristotelian-Ptolemaic worldview

In this cosmology, which prevailed until the 17th century, angelic beings are responsible for making the celestial bodies orbit the Earth.

Source: Changing Ideas of the Universe, by Maud Worcester Makemson.



Newtonian-Cartesian worldview

The Newtonian-Cartesian worldview is a system of thought based on the work of British physicist Isaac Newton (1642 - 1727) and the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596 - 1650). Newton described a mechanistic universe that is stable and predictable, and that obeys the law of cause and effect. Descartes formulated a concept of the absolute dualism between mind and matter, resulting in a belief that the material world can be described objectively, without reference to the human being.

This was the prevailing worldview throughout the 20th century, and it continues to *have a big impact* on the way we think, speak and act.

Pre-systemic worldview

People with a pre-systemic worldview have embraced some aspects of the systemic worldview, but their Newtonian-Cartesian worldview still runs the show.

Some people operating under a pre-systemic worldview cannot entertain the possibility of constructing their reality differently. Some condemn evolutionary models such as the one I presented earlier, believing them to be anti-egalitarian.

Others mistakenly believe they have upgraded to a systemic worldview already. In his book *Feeling and Personhood—Psychology in Another Key*, John Heron, a prominent figure in the field of humanistic psychology, wrote:

"**By the end of the seventeenth century a significant minority were already well established in the Newtonian-Cartesian belief system in the world of essence; but in the world of appearance most ordinary people were almost certainly still seeing the High Street, the sun, moon and stars in terms of the Aristotelio-medieval world-view.**

In the same way, today [1992]**, a significant minority have abandoned the Newtonian-Cartesian belief system in favour of some elaboration of systems theory world-view. But it may be that they, and certainly the majority of people, still *see* the world in Newtonian-Cartesian terms.**

It is a big shift for concepts to move from being simply beliefs held in the mind to beliefs that inform and transform the very act of perception."

In the organisational realm, the pre-systemic worldview is the prevailing operating system. It is gives rise to such concepts as customer focus, employee engagement, triple bottom line, sustainability, teamwork, corporate culture, values, and behaviour-based based culture change.

Systemic worldview

What is a systemic worldview?

This definition, from National Academy of Public Administration in Washington, DC, is the best I've been able to find:

"**A systemic worldview is a system of thought that considers all the factors and elements involved, including how they relate to each other, how they work together as a whole, what the system needs in order to survive, thrive, and evolve in its environment, and how the system impacts and interacts with its surrounding environment, including how the system will be able to respond and evolve as needs and the surrounding environment change.**"

Those who have upgraded to a systemic worldview are not just systems thinkers. They are systems actors.

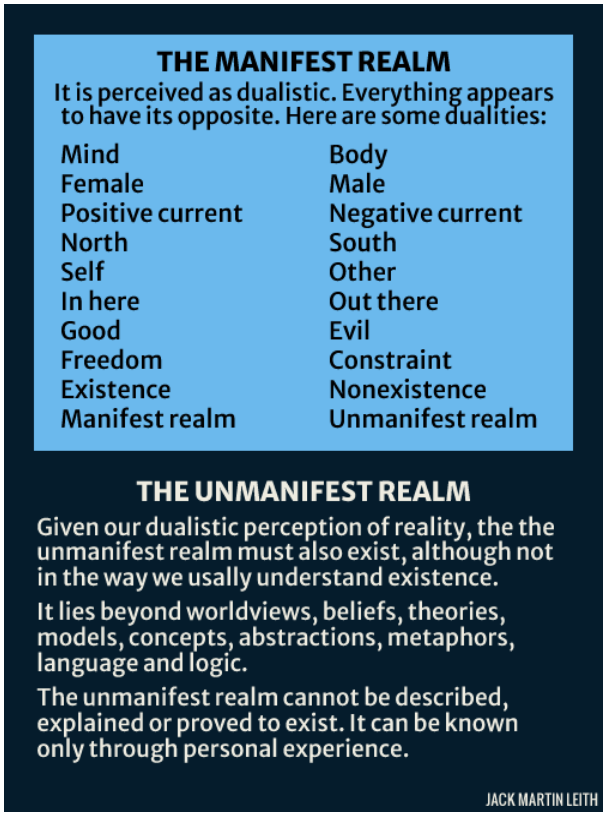
Many varieties of systems thinking exist. Each is based on a different set of assumptions, and there is not much common ground. The main ones are listed below.

- General systems theory (Ludwig von Bertalanffy)
- Cybernetics—first and second order (Norbert Wiener, Ross Ashby, Gregory Bateson, Francisco Varela, Humberto Maturana)
- Management cybernetics—Viable System Model (Stafford Beer)
- Soft systems methodology (Peter Checkland)
- Sociotechnical systems (Eric Trist, Ken Bamforth and Fred Emery)
- System dynamics (Jay Forrester)
- Complex systems (Santa Fe Institute, Ralph Stacey, Dave Snowden)

Post-systemic worldview

Proposition 9: Greatness arises from the realm beyond systems thinking.

A post-systemic worldview takes us much closer to the way the universe (not just the world) really works. Thinking and acting with a post-systemic worldview enables us to create the new, and change this into that, in a way that transcends theories, models and methods. This worldview emphasises acting in harmony with the natural way of things.



People with a post-systemic worldview take everything into account, including the 'bad' stuff, and including that which emanates from beyond the physical realm. Ever open to the new, they take nothing at face value, treat all knowledge as provisional, and trust their own experience over impoverished theories.

"**Science needs to free itself from materialist dogma; indeed, science misunderstands nature by being wedded to purely materialist explanations.**" Rupert Sheldrake, The Best Schools (view source).

We will remain in the realm beyond systems thinking for the rest of this article.

Procreation

Proposition 10: In the realm beyond systems thinking, the process of bringing the new into being mimics human procreation

The process of human reproduction and development does not happen in stages. It is continuous. But because it is almost impossible to describe a continuous process, let's imagine we're writing a 'having and bringing up a baby' book that's divided into seven chapters: Readiness, Conception, Commitment, Gestation, Birth, Potential Realisation, and Completion.

Readiness Are you ready to have a baby? Why do you want to have a baby? Is this the right time to be having a baby? What challenges will you face? How can you create the right conditions for conception to occur? When is the best time to conceive?

Conception One way or another, a sperm fertilises an ovum and conception occurs.

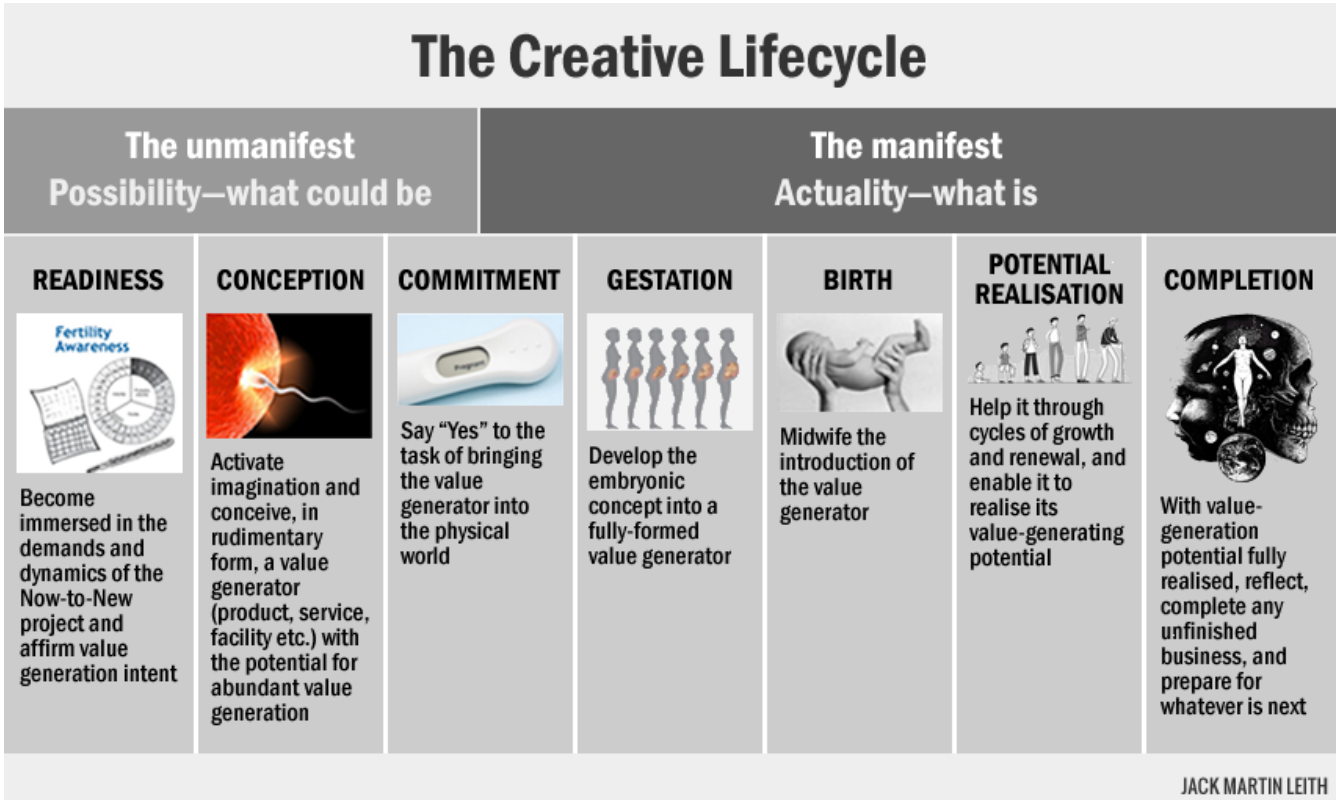
Commitment "Congratulations, you are pregnant." This news forces a decision (commit or terminate?) and marks a transition from the realm of the unknown to the realm of the known.

Gestation Over a nine-month period, the zygote (fertilised ovum) becomes an embryo, which develops into a foetus.

Birth The baby is delivered ('deliver' being the correct verb for once) and takes its first breath. The umbilical cord is cut. Mother and baby are now separate entities.

Potential realisation The parents help their offspring become all that he or she can be.

Completion The offspring's work is done.



Translating the procreation metaphor into innovation and change work

Let’s now see how the procreation metaphor translates into innovation work (bringing the new into being) and change work (shifting from the current state of affairs to the desired state).

Both types of work can be regarded as acts of creation: bringing forth a new value generator or a new organisational reality where none existed before.

Readiness

Proposition 11: Readiness work activates creative imagination.

The project team, composed of all those whose contribution, co-operation and consent are vital to the successful completion of the project, gets ready for the work that lies ahead.

The team’s first task is to understand the creative brief. If this not been provided, the project team will need to produce it themselves. The brief is treated as a provisional statement and is not taken at face value,

Creative brief

Purpose What is the intended purpose of this Now-to-New project? Why is the new value generator or state of affairs required? How does this contribute to the enterprise's overarching purpose?

Context What is providing the impetus for this project? What is the background story?

Requirements What specific results or outcomes are required? What value must be created for each beneficiary? What existing value must be preserved? What anti-value generation must be arrested?

Constraints These are the non-negotiables, the 'musts' and 'must-nots'. Completion date and budget are included here.

Once the project team has got to grips with the creative brief, it carries out further activities, including those summarised below, that convert the initial brief into a well-formed design specification and help establish the required state of readiness.

Expose phantom constraints These seem to be real, but vanish the moment you turn the light on. A common type of phantom constraint is what Gary Hamel calls 'orthodoxies': the norms, conventions, false assumptions, cherished beliefs, unwritten rules and sacred cows that limit possibilities and influence behaviour in an enterprise, industry or sector.

Create an inventory of assets The team creates an inventory of tangible and intangible assets, including core competencies, that might be leveraged in order to create the specified value generator (for innovation projects) or the desired state of affairs (for change projects).

Explore the wider context The team explores external factors that might have a bearing on the innovation or change project, perhaps using a framework such as STEEP (Social, Technological, Environmental, Economic, Political factors). Discontinuities will be of particular interest when an innovation project is called for. A discontinuity is a convergence of events or trends that substantially changes the structure of an industry and the rules of the game (source: Gary Hamel).

Vision of realised potential The team envisions a new reality in which the required value is now present. The vision is outward-facing: its focus is the world, not the enterprise. It takes the form of a picture with explanatory text. It depicts a desired present, not a desired future. And it reflects a disposition of unconditional service.

The vision of realised potential forms a bridge from the readiness work to the conception of an idea that will form the core of the required value generator or change intervention.

Now that the team is fully immersed in the demands of the project, it is primed for the moment of conception.

Conception

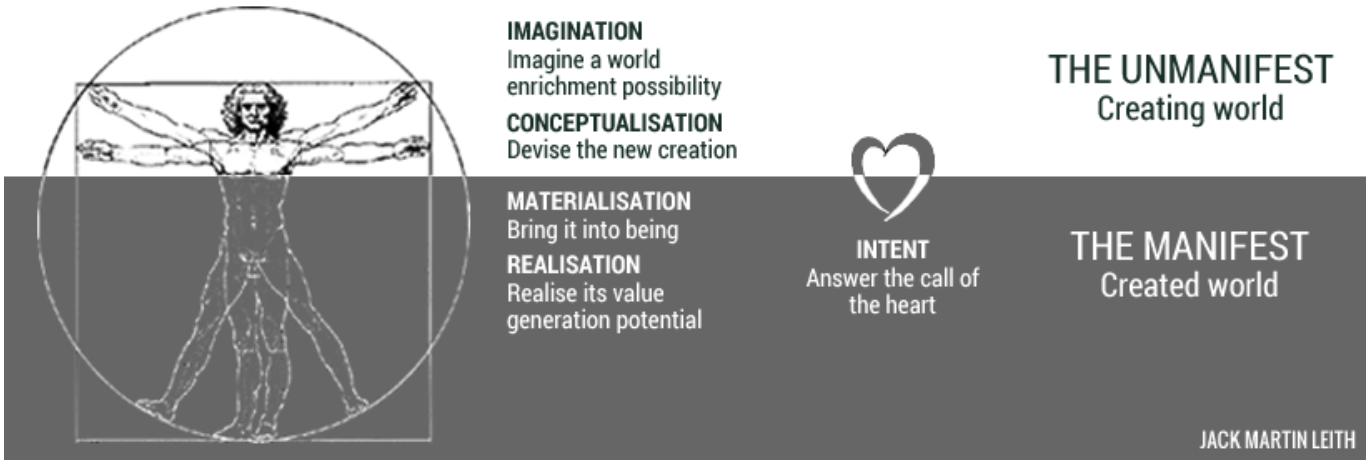
The readiness work, and the vision of realised potential in particular, engenders a state of awareness that enables team members to shut out interference from the D-field and open themselves to creative imagination.

Although I have been a vocal advocate of co-creation for more than two decades, I want to stress that **an idea is conceived in the mind of one person**. This is not a proposition—it's how the creative process works. Other team members will develop the idea throughout the gestation period, but conception is a solo activity.

There are striking similarities between the conception of a fruitful idea and the conception that takes place in the womb:

- A **possibility** exists for enriching the world in a certain way. (This corresponds with the ovum.)
- **Creative imagination** is readily accessible. (This corresponds with the sperm.)
- The **union of possibility and creative imagination** brings forth a concept having the power to enrich the world. (This corresponds with the act of fertilisation and the formation of a zygote.)

Proposition 12: The human is an instrument for creating the new.



The part of ourselves situated above the heart is concerned with imagining possibilities for value generation and world enrichment. The part located below the heart is concerned with materialisation and potential realisation. When purpose, our heartfelt desire to enrich the world, resonates with humanity's unmet needs, the two parts unite, the value generation possibility is vitalised, and it moves into the physical realm.

Commitment

Proposition 13: Commitment is an act of faith.

This is a crucial decision point. Is each team member prepared to do whatever it takes to carry the concept through the process of gestation and bring it into the physical world? Is everyone ready to say "Yes" and proceed in faith, despite the ocean of uncertainty that lies before them?

"**Faith is a critical but curious mind's readiness to adopt a reality model (even if provisionally) for which there is less than absolute, empirical proof.**" Jay Gaskill, The Dialogic Imperative (pdf).

Without the wholehearted commitment of team members and the project's sponsor, the project is dead in the water.

Gestation

Proposition 14: Downstream work requires an unconditional service disposition.

Once commitment has been made, the developmental process of gestation begins.

The team makes a rough drawing, three dimensional model, role-play, simulation, storyboard or other artefact. The purpose of this 'pretotype' is to bring the concept into the physical world, even if in a very crude form. This is an essential part of the manifestation process. The concept can now be shared with others, both inside and outside the enterprise. Their ongoing feedback will enable the team to enhance and refine the embryonic entity as it *progresses through* a series of iterations. (Sometimes the 'change is a journey' metaphor is unavoidable.)

In an enterprise, the counterpart of unconditional love is unconditional service. Unconditional service is selfless action taken by an individual or group on behalf of others, motivated by a deeply-felt desire to enrich the world.

Throughout the gestation period, the project team loves the embryonic creation like a mother loves her unborn child, providing essential nourishment and protection, and acting as its voice.

Birth

For the parents, the birth of a baby is a joyous and meaningful event, but it can also be painful, messy and fraught with uncertainty.

The launch a value generator or the deployment of a change intervention is no different. Towards the end of the gestation period the project team must make preparations for the birth, be ready for all eventualities and leave nothing to chance.

Potential realisation

This stage of the lifecycle is concerned with moving the creation through cycles of development and renewal, and realising the value-generation potential of the new creation. Those responsible for this work, notably marketing, customer service and innovation teams, revisit the value specification and seek to create maximum experienced value for each beneficiary group, using every means at their disposal.

Completion

With value-generation potential fully realised, the lifecycle is complete. This is a time to reflect, complete any unfinished business, and prepare for whatever is next.

Conclusion and thanks

In this article—a labour of love—I have presented 14 propositions for creating greatness in the realm beyond systems thinking:

1. We are here to enrich the world.
2. An enterprise exists to enrich the world.
3. There are three main types of value: economic, abstract, and experienced.
4. The converse of value is anti-value.
5. Value is co-created through the interaction between the value beneficiary (e.g. consumer, user) and the value generator (product, service etc.).
6. Greatness-creating enterprises seek to generate maximum value for all beneficiaries — not just favoured groups such as customers and investors.
7. A set of powerful constraints inhibits the shift from mediocrity to greatness.
8. Truly original ideas having the potential to enrich the world come to us by means of creative imagination, and not through synthetic imagination, which produces derivative ideas and mediocrity.
9. Greatness arises from the realm beyond systems thinking.
10. In the realm beyond systems thinking, the process of bringing the new into being mimics human procreation.
11. Readiness work activates creative imagination.
12. The human is an instrument for creating the new.
13. Commitment is an act of faith.
14. Downstream work requires an unconditional service disposition.

These propositions are the fruits of a lifetime of study, deliberation, experimentation and real-world application. I hope you have found them of value, and thank you for your patience, tenacity and fortitude as you complete your *voyage* through this unavoidably long article.

My special thanks go to the co-convenors of European Sharing on Systems Thinking, Peter Lauritzen and Klára Lauritzenová, for giving me the opportunity to share these ideas, some of which are seeing the light of day for the first time.

About Jack Martin Leith

Jack is a veteran innovation practitioner and the originator of Newcreate, an ‘enrich the world’ way of thinking, doing and being. Newcreators use mind, body and spirit to transcend the mundane, create the new and enrich the world, or a particular piece of it, with value, meaning and joy. He is based in Bristol, United Kingdom.

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