

AFTERWORD

Learnership 2009: The Re-Invigoration of America

Bees, ants, and termites, though not very smart individually, display high intelligence collectively—people seem just the opposite.

E. O. Wilson

As this book goes to press in November, 2008, the American scene contains a cacophony of issues, challenges, and opportunities concerning the strength of our national traditions, the adequacy of our current leadership and policies, and the direction we should be pursuing as individuals, organizations, communities, and as an American society.

The candidates for President and Vice President battled with increased energy and commitment to win the election since their summer nominating conventions. Individual personalities, party platforms, and media excitement were all actively engaged as the American people weighed their choices and focused on democratically determining this nation's future. The approximately 120 million voters, greater than any other election in memory, allowed the Democratic Party to seize the reins of power from the Republican Party in both the Executive and Congressional branches of government. All indications are that a collective of centrist Democrats, Republicans, and Independents have voted to direct the nation's affairs from the broad center of the American political landscape.

Recapitulation: America 2008

Amid all the election media excitement and national debate, a “perfect storm” of negative trends with major international implications has thundered onto the horizon and is driving waves of potential destruction that threaten our revered landscape. It may be useful to review the formative background of our recent experience in order to assess how the learnership philosophy, principles, and practices might be usefully employed for improved reasoning, learning, knowledge-sharing, decision-making, and societal action.

A high-level synopsis of issues of selected concern to Americans, organized in accordance with the Learnership Universal Knowledge Spheres framework, includes:

1. Social Knowledge Sphere. This sphere addresses the associations and living arrangements among individuals and groups in society. Focus is on the dynamics of social activity among individuals, organizations and institutions. Major emphasis is on education, learning, culture, human relations, interpersonal communication, and the media. Current Issues: High rates of unemployment and under-employment; lack of health care availability; unwed mothers and children without fathers; under-educated and irresponsible youth; significant increase in elder population; promiscuity and sexually transmitted disease; family planning and abortion; crime and gratuitous violence; and morally destructive cultural trends.

2. Economic Knowledge Sphere. This sphere concerns the production, development and management of income and wealth. Focus is on the production and distribution of goods and services. Primary emphasis is on business management, financial management, and social

system economic development. Current Issues: Pockets of poverty and deprivation; imbalance of income and wealth; slow growth and prosperity of the middle class; loss of industrial manufacturing and the outsourcing of jobs; disproportionate executive/celebrity compensation; high level of school dropout and a poorly educated and skilled workforce; overuse of credit, high rates of foreclosure, negative rates of investment and savings; high cost of expanding social services; retirement issues and expenses; theft of intellectual property and capital; and recessionary trends in industrial production and financial markets.

3. Political Knowledge Sphere. This sphere deals with the study, structure, or affairs of government, politics, and the state. Focus is on citizenship, governance, foreign policy, political and cultural choices, law and order, and national defense. Current Issues: Warring factions, nations, and nuclear arms proliferation; natural resource manipulation and threats; nationalism and terrorism; international crime and human trafficking; pockets of poverty and social unrest; and ideologically-based political gridlock.

4. Geographical Knowledge Sphere. This sphere concerns the preservation of physical, geographical, and continental regions of the entire earth. Emphasis is on international issues and relationships concerning nation-states' territorial boundaries and conflicts, population and immigration challenges, and property ownership and resource rights. Current Issues: Impoverished territories and nations; cultural and religious autocracy; unequally distributed natural resources; over-population and unmanaged immigration; destruction of oxygen generating biomass; territorial rights and borders; and culture and language mobility across states and borders.

5. Ecological Knowledge Sphere. This sphere concerns the relationships between organisms, their environments, and the goal of sustainable habitats. Emphasis is on the life processes and characteristic phenomena of living organisms. Focus is on bio-system management, energy production, population and demographics, and the availability of food and health services. Current Issues: Global warming, coral reef destruction, melting of glaciers, larger hurricanes; build-up of carbon dioxide and decrease in ozone in the atmosphere; animal species loss, ocean over-fishing; emerging and spreading disease, water pollution, and garbage disposal; wildlife habitat destruction; and topsoil erosion and wetlands damage.

6. Technological Knowledge Sphere. This sphere concerns the application of scientific methods and tools to societal activities. Emphasis is on the study, development, and application of scientific methods and materials to achieve societal objectives. Major focus is on biotechnology, information technology, and materials technology. Current Issues: International expansion of intranets and internets; explosion of social networking technology and web sites; rapid development and sales of cell phones, iPods, and Blackberries; enhanced database and computer platform tools and applications; world-wide mobile connectivity; security/privacy issues and innovations; government/industry information disclosure; web hacking, phishing, and identity theft; pharmaceutical discoveries and innovations; and on-line banking, investment, personal financial risks.

These issues are often cross-connected, interdependent forces that establish the context for, or are the resulting outcomes from citizen complaints, organizational activism, and/or government

policies. Together, they create the context within which leaders with limited resources strive to develop policies and programs that the majority of citizens will support.

Hot, Flat, and Crowded

An influential source of perspective on American history and future trends within a global context is prominent author, and commentator Thomas L. Friedman. His latest book entitled Hot, Flat, and Crowded, (2008) analyzes the convergence and competition of world-wide social, economic, political, technological, ecological, and geographical forces that impact the future growth and development of America. His primary theme is “Why we need a green revolution and how it will renew America.”

Friedman’s book envisions an immediate global future of 50 years in which things will get very hot (global warming), flat (internet connected), and crowded (growing from 6.5 to 9.0 billion people) wherein a huge world-wide middle class will demand extraordinary increases in products and services similar to the experiences of those nations already fully developed. Friedman comments that: “This book focuses on five key problems that a hot, flat, and crowded world is dramatically intensifying. They are: the growing demand for ever scarcer energy supplies and natural resources; a massive transfer of wealth to oil-rich countries and their petro-dictators; disruptive climate change; energy poverty, which is sharply dividing the world into electricity haves and have-nots; and rapidly accelerating biodiversity loss, as plants and animals go extinct at record rates.” (pp. 26-27)

Friedman offers this summary of his views and the challenge before us concerning the task ahead for American leaders and the American people: “We are the first generation of Americans in the Energy-Climate Era. This is not about whales anymore. It’s about us. And what we do about the challenges of energy and climate, conservation and preservation, will tell our kids who we really are. Our fortune is that we were born at a time of enormous prosperity and technological innovation. Our misfortune is that to spread that prosperity and reach new heights of technological development, we can’t do it the old way—by just mining the global commons and by thinking that the universe and nature revolve around us, and not the other way around. (p.412)

Wicked Problems, Social Complexity, and Societal Fragmentation

What we have been alluding to above, is the increasing interdependency and rapid pace of change among so many contemporary societal factors that impact the daily lives of individuals, their organizations, and their communities. Uncertainty is rampant and complexity threatens to overwhelm even well managed organizations and communities. Wicked problems are often "technically complex" due to the large number of credible and influential forces that need to be considered.

In *Social Complexity* (2001) author Jeff Conklin addresses the all too familiar concern that the issues and problems modern society has to address are so dynamic and complex that they resist the thinking and efforts of even the most skillful of experts and leaders. Conklin states that "wicked problems" further complicated by "social complexity" are *forces of fragmentation* that challenge collective intelligence, doom projects, and make collaboration difficult or impossible.

Conklin attributes the definition of wicked problems to Horst Rittel, an early expert on the topic. Characteristics of wicked problems are:

1. Wicked problems have no clearly defined stopping point or rule
2. Every wicked problem is essentially complex and novel based on current factors
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not right or wrong—they tend to require debate and evolving consensus
4. We don't really understand the problem until we have developed tentative solutions
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a "one-shot operation" that can change
6. Wicked problems have no absolute, sustainable solutions for the long term

Conklin adds that "social complexity is a property of the social network that is engaging with the problem, and that when social complexity co-concurs with wicked problems, extreme fragmentation is virtually certain to be the result. (p.13) For example, when there are numerous organizations, experts, prominent leaders, and different skill sets actively involved there is sure to be a high level of social complexity.

Conklin advises that the only way to proceed effectively is by "creating shared understanding about the problem, and shared commitment to the possible solution." (p.17) He says that this occurs when an "Opportunity Driven Problem Solving" methodology is employed. He indicates that the *antidote for fragmentation is coherence* and that can only occur when problems and solutions both become subjects for iterative thinking, design, and dialogue that lead incrementally to clarification of what problems and solutions fit well together. Through iterative processing and learning, *coherence* begins to take shape and consensus is possible because the participants involved come to believe something constructive has been learned and that a future solution is beginning to emerge. The caveat is that without executive leadership acceptance and support of the group's findings and suggestions—and concurrent understanding by the organizations and/or communities impacted—significant improvement may be unlikely.

In summary, wicked problems and social connectivity; exacerbated by rapid change, increasing time constraints, and circumstantial interdependency lead to uncertainty and instability tend to preclude the predictability needed for individual and group reasoning and mindful action. The suggested approach for addressing such troubling issues is to understand that ***coherence is the antidote for fragmentation***, and that coherence may be achieved through sequential, iterative discussions wherein new cycles of learning build necessary coherence and consensus, thereby leading to shared and improved understanding and commitment among participants.

A contemporary example of the fragmentation resulting from co-concurring wicked problems and social complexity is the U.S. led international recession in progress during Fall, 2008. The technical aspect of the wicked problem is that greed-driven, hyper-opportunist capitalism based on inflated housing prices, risky commercial lending, lack of prudent oversight of investment markets, and low levels of American industrial productivity has burst the frenetic bubble within which individuals, organizations, and communities have long been living. Loss in home equities, credit ratings, business profits, job opportunities, retirement savings, business sales, and consumer confidence—coupled with the fact that internet social communities and businesses are

able to obtain and weigh world perspectives and activities affecting their well-being—conspire toward rapid differentiation, fragmentation, and the breakdown in social cohesion.

Given this American dilemma, what decision-making and leadership methodology does the new administration taking office on January 20, 2009 intend to implement?

President-elect Barack Obama's New Direction for America

President-elect Barack Obama will come into office at a time when the nation is reeling from the huge costs of two wars, an economy that is heading into deep recession, a citizenry that is fed -up with partisan infighting, a clash of cultures between the extreme right and left wings of the voting public, and a clamor from international governments that the United States must return to its valued leadership role. In his recent book entitled: Change We Can Believe In (2008), Obama promulgates an overarching set of national goals which he intends to pursue in a parallel and integrated, rather than sequential, manner. Obama speaks to his "Hope for America," which in addition to stopping unnecessary and unpopular wars, includes:

1. Reviving Our Economy (Strengthening the Middle Class) – Provide immediate relief with an emergency economic plan, economic security and opportunity for all American families, affordable health care for all Americans, empower families to succeed, restore trust, and return to fiscal responsibility.

2. Investing in Our Prosperity (Creating Our Economic Future) – Promote our energy independence and create five million green jobs, a world-class education for every American, make America the undisputed leader in science and technology, build the infrastructure of the twenty-first century, help our small businesses and manufacturers thrive and create jobs, and compare and thrive in the global economy.

3. Rebuilding America's Leadership (Restoring Our Place in the World) – End the war in Iraq responsibly, finish the fight against Al Qaeda and turn the tide against global terrorism, rebuild a strong twenty-first century military, stop the spread of nuclear weapons, and renew our alliance to meet new global challenges.

4. Perfecting Our Union (Embracing America's Values) – Restore trust in government and clean-up Washington, make voluntary citizen service universal, partner with communities of faith, strengthen families, advance equal opportunity for all Americans, secure our borders and reform a broken immigration system, safeguard the environment for future generations, honor sportsmen and protect the great outdoors, and fight crime and promote public safety.

This comprehensive strategic approach is both unusual and enlightened because it recognizes the difficulties inherent in our rapidly changing and increasingly time-constrained living environment. The challenge, of course is that America's wicked problems and social complexity will expand exponentially driving fragmentation, while concurrently we the American people will be asked to maintain confidence that our adaptive capabilities and hope for the future will yield equitable returns on our effort. Nothing less than a national transformation and renewal has been envisioned.

The Learnership Integrated Systems Architecture (LISA)

National transformation and renewal requires strategic reasoning from the best and brightest individuals and organizations across America's intellectual disciplines and knowledge arenas. Reasoning and debate needs a foundation that is both broadly integrative and selectively differentiated to constructively engage the complexity surrounding policy deliberations. So how might the learnership philosophy and architecture—catalysts for knowledge building, organizational learning, and integrated problem-solving—be used to assist in national decision-making?

Learnership principles and practices provide a comprehensive perspective and methodology that support this task. Highlights from this book's Third Interlude that might be considered by those responsible for hosting national strategy and policy deliberations are offered as follows:

First, consider some guidelines:

1. Include well informed participants and subject matter experts who are skilled at the inquiry and advocacy responsibilities in social dialogue
2. Recognize the need for a disciplined methodology through which a sequence of open-minded dialogues enable participants to become better informed
3. Accept that in complex situations there are people with issues looking for solutions, and people with solutions looking for opportunities
4. Define and acknowledge the broad base of interdependent social system factors that require contextual consideration and that influence applicable decision criteria
5. Commit to learn and work toward consensual positions that establish the probability of interim progress within a longer-term strategic direction

Second, use the Learnership Integrated Systems Architecture (LISA). The major decision-making steps are:

Step 1 -- Select a topic or issue of high importance to the group, and for which achieving consensus and a solution have proven to be extremely difficult to accomplish. Create a working definition of the topic/issue. Record the results.

Step 2 -- Establish a representative list of important topics, trends, and issues that are relevant to each of the major elements of the LISA framework e.g., relevant to the 12 universal values and goals, 6 knowledge spheres, 5 reasoning competencies, 4 social systems, and the 3 major influences on situational learning and decision-making. Record the results.

Step 3 -- Rank each of the 12, the 6, the 5, the 4, and the 3 items selected above in terms of significance and influence according to the participants. Identify which items on the list are in the top, middle, and lowest third of all the items.

Step 4 -- Proceed with a iterative series of information-seeking meetings in which in which solutions are proposed, alternatives are considered, priorities are established, and choices are made that represent a reasonable (but not necessarily fully supported) way forward.

Third, implement the preferred solution taking care to inform, direct, coach, and support others' involvement for as long as necessary to obtain desired results. Visible leadership and comprehensive communication will be essential elements for achieving the cultural change and productive activity needed to achieve meaningful national results.

Conclusion

America is at a crossroad in our ability to craft and implement a model for societal organization that benefits world-wide human development within a sustainable global habitat. Our goals and aspirations; as articulated in our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution and Bill of Rights, and our support for the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (see appendix); all testify to our allegiance to the highest principles of human competence and development.

This book's discourse on Learnership 2009: The Re-invigoration of America through Total Learning, Knowing, and Leading as a Mindful Way-of-Being (www.alforum.org) is intended as an educational resource that stimulates and supports America's transformation and renewal.

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