

## CHAPTER ONE

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# *Coherence*

### *The Mysterious and Scientific Side of Problem Solving*

#### **PONDERING ALIGNMENT IN TEAMS**

After spending so many hours of my life in meetings, classes, negotiations, and workshops that have either been spectacularly fruitful or numbingly unproductive, I began to look for the patterns and similarities at work when things go well. I noticed that there is an alignment that takes place in a successful group interaction in which the participants seem to build on each other's energy, and share a unity of purpose and a creative synergy that almost seems to guarantee success for an enterprise.

I began to realize at some point in the inquiry that it is possible to use these principles of alignment to become a more powerful and effective problem solver and leader. This "energy" I was perceiving seems to be a common factor in any creative process in which two or more individuals come together to collaborate, that is, to work together to solve a problem or create something new. The term *coherence* implies a phenomenon that can be perceived from group discussions as the thinking of participants begins to form observable patterns. As I will explain later in the chapter, I am borrowing the term from other disciplines to describe the condition that exists when individuals are aligned on a given subject or task, and are ready to harness their collective energy to move forward on a common ground solution.

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I have noticed in team building workshops that participants describe this phenomenon when they are asked to specify a great team on which they took part, and to name the qualities that made that team effective. Invariably they would talk about a particular chemistry, based on such qualities as:

- Joint commitment to shared goals
- Trust of all members to understand their roles and get the job done
- Shifting leadership based on task and circumstances
- Excellent communications
- Understanding each other's needs and perspectives
- A sense of humor
- Willingness to set aside differences and to work together for the greater good

None of these qualities separately suggests an unusual alignment or dynamic, but the combination of the characteristics implies that there is something happening that causes each individual to let go of his or her own view of the world in order to become part of something bigger and broader. As we will explore later in this book, letting go is not always a positive thing, but when it happens in the context of a joint effort to create something new that elegantly addresses our greatest needs, it makes it possible to accomplish things that we could never do on our own.

### WHY COHERENCE MATTERS

Public sector leaders might well wonder why they should invest precious time and energy learning to perceive and harness the dynamics of coherence in group problem solving and decision making. An answer can be found in the current era of high-stakes accountability that has public educators feeling as if they are continually under siege. A look at current literature suggests that the hope for maintaining the vitality of public education may lie in the ability of educational leaders to successfully cultivate agreement in groups.

Fullan (2003) points out that deep and sustained change in an educational organization can only come to pass when there is broad

ownership of the change on the part of teachers and principals. Fullan characterizes the need for leaders to find ways to establish and support “informed professional judgment” that “must be pursued continually through cultures of interaction inside and outside the school (p. 7).” That means that a primary task of the school leader is to “create and sustain disciplined inquiry and action on the part of teachers.” He asserts that principals who are not equipped to facilitate this alignment will not be successful.

Lindstrom and Speck (2004) declare that effective staff development programs, the very lifeblood of school reform, “must be founded on a sense of collegiality and collaboration” (p. 15). They describe the “richness” that comes from colleagues inquiring together, innovating to develop new practices, and reflecting together on those practices to create “a new form of professionalism that clearly links leading and learning.” They believe that this creates a necessity for principals to lead from within, rather than imposing from above. Similarly, DuFour and Eaker (1998) characterize “collective inquiry” as “the engine of improvement, growth and renewal in a professional learning community” (p. 25).

But despite its current appeal, collaboration and collegiality do not happen spontaneously. As we will see, it requires habits and a discipline that obligates a public leader to be much more facilitative and far less directive than our learned practice may have been.

## **THRIVING IN AN ADVERSARIAL WORLD**

We live in an adversarial world, a fact that is apparent to most leaders whose task it is to create community. Ours tends to be a competitive, blameful society with organizations increasingly subject to customers and coworkers who are determined to get their own way. Often those who most articulately espouse the values of collaboration in working relationships unwittingly revert to fight and flight habits, which have been programmed into our gene pool for tens of thousands of years. While those adversarial habits may be critical to us in a life or death situation, they can also run counter to harmonious principles that could make it much more productive to align disputing parties toward agreement rather than submitting to fight-or-flight.

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### **A Natural Inclination to Be Adversarial**

Controlling the extent that we yield to our fight and flight responses is not an easy task. A look at the anatomy of the brain explains why. Emotional pathways in our brains are mediated by the almond-sized amygdala that sits at the base of the brain. As LeDoux (1996) explains it, the emotional responses of the amygdala occur more rapidly and imprecisely than the more “detailed and accurate representations (that) come from the cortex” (p. 165), and so our bodies program us to respond quickly to conflict or perceived danger in a way that prepares us to run or do battle, rather than engage the source of our stress through problem solving. This is a result of the evolutionary processes of natural selection in which our species “learned” that a fight and flight response to danger was the most successful one to keep us from becoming the quarry of natural predators. So while we come equipped with the sections of the cerebral cortex that give us the ability to process sensory information and to respond with conscious complexity, we must be aware that we have an emotional response mechanism that will mobilize us more quickly, and often less reliably (LeDoux, 1996; Wolfe, 2001; Dickmann & Stanford-Blair, 2002).

I experience this conditioning when I’m hiking or running along a road or trail, and I see something snakelike lying in the path. It may be a stick, a piece of hose or tire, or even a dead snake, but my body reacts as if it sees the real thing and I can feel the adrenalin start to rush until my more rational mind takes over and reassures me that there is no danger. Similarly, in my professional and consulting life, I have often worked with teams in which emotion had become so extreme that it was dominating interpersonal interactions. One elementary school faculty was so impacted by emotion that interactions among staff were characterized by shouting, name-calling, and interpersonal avoidance. The result was a toxic environment in which the quality of the services to students was suffering.

### **A Different Kind of Leadership and Listening**

The complexity of modern society and organizations requires a different kind of leadership. We used to rely on charismatic heroes, epitomized in the Hollywood Western by Gary Cooper or John Wayne, to identify what needed fixing and to resolve it quickly with a steady hand and a sure shot. But the world is a more intricately, interconnected place than it used to be, and it is demanding different kinds

of leaders who can mobilize the whole team to respond to stressors harmoniously enough to be able to collaborate together on solutions.

The problem solver of the new millennium needs the ability to listen to an open and honest conversation for meaning, intent, and common ground, much as an aficionado of a certain style of music can hear nuances in a piece from that style that are beyond the notice of a less trained ear. It is possible to learn to listen to the “music” of conflict in the same way, and hear patterns and themes that otherwise go undetected. This trained ear enables the problem solver to integrate multiple perspectives in a way that produces something greater than could have been achieved alone.

I had heard over the years about the close connection between jazz and problem solving, but I never truly appreciated this relationship until my brother threw himself a birthday party and hired a jazz duet to entertain. A friend of his, a flute player who lived across the country, came to the party and joined the hired musicians for a large portion of the program. I knew little about jazz, but marveled at how well they worked together and how seamlessly they moved back and forth, one of them improvising while the others played supporting roles. I understood even then that I was seeing collaboration at its best as roles shifted and the leadership changed. The result was delightful music. I was so impressed by how well they played together that I asked the flutist afterwards when they had found time to rehearse. He thanked me and laughed, “Oh, there was no chance to rehearse. I just got up and we started playing.” Each of them knew the music well enough and had a well-trained ear for jazz, so that when they started to play together good things just happened.

This phenomenon is not unusual in the jazz world. In fact, the vocabulary that describes the process of playing jazz is rich with the kinds of words that describe the process of problem solving. The language of jazz becomes a helpful way to understand the kind of coherence that gets other kinds of problems solved as well. This collection of quotes from the Jazz School Lucerne (2002, pp. 1–7) conveys that collaborative language of jazz:

It’s really just based on listening . . . more than anything else.  
(Kenny Barron)

When I’m listening to the other musicians and thinking about the form of a piece . . . little things arise which I have to negotiate. (Chuck Israels)

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You want to achieve that kind of communication when you play. When you do, your playing seems to be making sense. It's like a conversation. (Tommy Flanagan)

The give-and-take is ideal, so that if you go down a second, all you have to do is to keep quiet and let someone else play for a second. In that way, the music continues to grow. (Lee Konitz)

These references to conversation, communication, negotiation, and creating conjure notions of partners working together instinctively to produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. It implies a process of letting go of the self to join into relationships that are bigger than the individuals involved. It suggests aligning the actors so that their solutions accomplish more than any of the individuals could have managed on their own. If it can be shown that this alignment produces better outcomes for groups, teams, and organizations, then it should follow that a primary function in leadership is to inspire and organize groups in such a way that they can frequently achieve that coherence.

I have heard the same descriptions applied to sports teams as well. Soccer aficionados describe a beautiful interaction of players working together improvisationally to try to make something happen. It is on the one hand very egalitarian, with every player performing a function that is vital to the team's success, but also a process that lends itself to great virtuosity, in which individual capacity to perform at a level that involves both excellence and surprise also plays a critical role in the success of the team. A colleague of mine once described her passion for her own favorite sport of basketball in similar terms. An excellent team and excellent players learn together to understand and anticipate, not only one another but what the other team is doing as well, and so they cultivate a chemistry that can bring about unique and productive results. That chemistry reflects groups of individuals working together in a harmonious alignment, which is everyone's goal in a contemporary organization.

### **Looking More Closely for Order**

This mirrors the complexity of chaos theory that began to unite scientists and mathematicians across a wide variety of disciplines in the last third of the twentieth century. What began to emerge over so many branches of learning is a realization that the world may tend

toward chaos, but there is an order to that disarray, or a “fine structure hidden within a disorderly stream of data” (Gleik, 1987, p. 29). This presses us to look more closely at how groups of people are interacting, and to look more closely for order or alignment where none has otherwise been suspected or perceived.

The alignment in a group often goes unnoticed by those who are involved in it. I remember a follow-up visit I made to a negotiation session between teachers and managers I had helped to develop collaborative bargaining strategies. We agreed that we would begin the day with my observing how they were working together, so they resumed negotiations on an issue they had already started to address. After about a half hour, I began to feel a little impatient with the discussions, so I interrupted and mentioned that I thought they were pretty much in agreement. “Oh no,” they replied. “We’re nowhere near finished with this issue.” I asked them to let me test that assumption, and named the consensus I was hearing. To their surprise, everyone in the room indicated assent, and so they were able to move on in the agenda. The degree of coherence can be noticed in a group if the eye and the ear are trained to detect it in much the same way that a person can learn to discriminate the qualities and characteristics of a particular style of music or a sport.

## A SCIENCE AS WELL AS AN ART

Scientific literature is filled with fascinating examples of research into this principle of alignment, and technology is delivering methods of demonstrating the notion that it is possible to align people in ways that truly allow them to think together. However skeptically we might react to this notion, it does provide a concrete model of how the consciousness of two or more individuals can produce an alignment that is deeper than normal experience has previously considered possible. A series of physics experiments proposed by John Bell in the 1960s are frequently referenced as evidence of the interconnectedness in the natural world. Stated simply, they show that two microscopic particles have correlations that cannot be explained even when removed from each other by a large enough distance that they are not normally able to communicate with one another. So measurements to one of the objects will determine the outcome of measurements to the other (Goswami, 2000). While most physicists

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would be reluctant to relate the behavior of particles to people, it does at least provide a metaphor for describing one way to think about human consciousness.

### **When Life Imitates Physics**

Jacobo Grinberg-Zylberbaum conducted research indicating that there is a similar correlation created when human subjects meditate together with the intent to establish a connection. When the subjects were separated afterward into isolated chambers and one of the two individuals was exposed to a light stimulus, the EEG of the second subject responded as if also exposed to the same stimulus (Laszlo, 1996). Physicists refer to this alignment as coherence, and it can be distinguished from incoherence by a dance analogy. A line of professional dancers all doing the same steps in unison, like the Radio City Rockettes or those in *Riverdance*, describes *phase coherence*. A group of random patrons in a nightclub, all dancing together on the same dance floor, but each improvising their own steps to the same rock music and behaving independently from one another, describes *phase incoherence* (Goswami, 2000, p. 68).

There are other examples from scientific literature suggesting the existence of a coherence principle that can align individuals. In a double-blind experiment, Krippner established the possibility that a “sender” concentrating on a randomly selected art print can influence the dreams of a subject. The study showed a significant correlation between the art print that was being “transmitted” and “considerably higher” scores on those evenings on which there was less geothermal activity impacting the area where the research was conducted (Persinger and Krippner, 1989). There are many other reports of “extranormal” connections analogous to the Bell experiments, between mothers and their children, between lovers, and between identical twins in which one individual reacts to a traumatic event experienced by the other though separated by large distances (Laszlo, 1996).

### **Evidence of Powerful Human Connections**

There is also evidence that human consciousness can impact the natural world. Physicist Werner Heisenberg (1958) reasoned that the “reality” of an “event” is dependent on the nature of our “observation”

of that event (p. 52). Researchers have also found that the behavior of random number generators becomes “positively non-random” at moments in modern history when the collective consciousness of a large number of people is focused on a single event, such as an important athletic event or the O.J. Simpson trial (Goswami, 2000). These experiments have been replicated at the Global Consciousness Project at Princeton University where they are collecting a database that includes a nonrandom curve lasting for two days after the events of September 11, 2001. While the GCP admits to little understanding of why it happens, they report on their observations as follows:

While there are viable alternative explanations, the anomalous correlation is not a mistake or a misreading. It can be interpreted as a clear, if indirect, confirmation of the hypothesis that the (instruments’) behavior is affected by global events and our reactions to them. This is startling in scientific terms because we do not have widely accepted models that accommodate such an interpretation of the data. More important than the scientific interpretation, however, may be the question of meaning. What shall we learn, and what should we do in the face of evidence that we may be part of a global consciousness? Of course, this is not a new idea or a novel question. The results from this scientific study are an apparent manifestation of the ancient idea that we are all interconnected, and that what we think and feel has effects on others, everywhere in the world. (Nelson, 2002, p. 567)

This research suggests the possibility that individuals in the world do have a measurable interconnection with one another when consciousness is collectively focused on or by a single event.

Similarly, Rupert Sheldrake (1999) reviews a large database giving evidence that dogs, cats, and other animals are connected to people, or to other animals, in ways that go beyond familiar sensory explanations. A typical account describes a story of an animal that can reliably predict the erratic behavior of the human master. Sheldrake describes “morphic fields” at work that are essentially identical to the behavior of the particles in Bell’s experiments described above.

Morphic fields link together the members of a social group . . . .  
A member who goes to a distant place still remains connected

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to the rest of the group through this social field, which is elastic. Morphic fields would permit a range of telepathic influences to pass from animal to animal within a social group, or from person to person, or from person to companion animal. The ability of these fields to stretch out like invisible elastic bands enables them to act as channels for telepathic communication even over great distances (pp. 25–26).

I had an unsettling experience of my own a number of years ago that caused me to puzzle over how humans can connect. I was standing in my kitchen talking with my oldest daughter who was then in middle school. She was involved in a school project on spelling, and our discussion about her work triggered a memory from my seventh grade year about an old friend of mine—the best speller in the class—who made it to the finals of the regional spelling championship. As I was telling my daughter how we would tease him for weeks afterwards about the word he had missed, the telephone rang. “Hi, John; this is Bill” (my long lost friend).

I hadn’t spoken to him for at least 20 years, and I was dumbfounded by the experience. There was a plausible reason for the call at that general period of time (he found my name in a high school reunion book that had only been published six months before) but it still seemed unfathomable that he would choose that five-minute window as the moment to place the transcontinental call. When I told him about his timing, he just laughed and said, “People tell me I have a knack for things like that.” While I didn’t fully appreciate it then, I have since realized that what happened that day was not only the result of some uncanny power of Bill’s (for such experiences were beyond the norm for me), but also might be related to an unexplainable connection that was somehow linking us over the span of all that time and distance.

### COHERENCE AND CONSCIOUSNESS

The theologian Teilhard de Chardin (1955) described the possibility of a consciousness connecting everyone in the world:

Everyone wants something larger, finer, better for mankind. Scattered throughout the apparently hostile masses which are

fighting each other, there are elements everywhere which are only waiting for a shock in order to re-orientate themselves and unite. All that is needed is that the right ray of light should fall upon these men as upon a cloud of particles, that an appeal should be sounded which responds to their internal needs and across all denominations, across all the conventional barriers which still exist, we shall see the living atoms of the universe seek each other out, find each other and organize themselves (p. 33).

If we can accept the possibility of such a unifying principle, then in its simplest form it can transform the way we approach conflict. We can find ways of aligning, or realigning, the thinking of parties to disputes so that they are, in fact, “organizing themselves” in such a way that they are thinking together, rather than striving to impose a preferred point of view on the other. David Bohm (1980, 1990) was fascinated enough by the prospect of a coherence principle operating between human beings (“consciousness”) that is similar to the correlation of particles (“matter”) that he devoted much of his final years exploring interconnections between people through the process of dialogue (Bohm, 1980, p. 196).

### **Coherence and Organizational Leadership**

My own professional practice over the past 30 years has led me to conclude intuitively what this emerging body of literature is beginning to document—that effective communications, problem solving, and conflict resolution in groups is, to a large measure, dependent on the degree of alignment that is created among the members of a given problem solving community. This possibility of a collective pool of consciousness that is greater than what is available to any of us as individuals certainly raises questions that defy our conventional understanding of the world. While there are no clear explanations yet for why or how this happens, there is increasing interest in the notion across a wide variety of disciplines. It is a major purpose of this book to understand coherence well enough to apply the principles to organizational leadership. This book will offer practitioners an approach to leadership that capitalizes on how people align to solve problems using the principles of coherence to ensure that the members of an organization are well situated to elegantly address the needs of the group and its members.

## **A Different Kind of Magic**

Contrary to what many people hope, a skilled facilitator waving a magic marking pen over the group does not create coherence. However, a good leader or facilitator can help to create the right conditions for alignment to happen. For example, in a traditional argument the intent is to persuade others to accept and adopt our own point of view. Conversely, alignment is achieved by a group of people who think, listen, and talk together in such a fashion that they are able to free themselves from their preconceived notions and begin to understand new possibilities. A positive coherence is the result of a thoughtful interchange of thinking and ideas in which everyone realizes that an optimal result will probably lead to everyone seeing the world differently.

For example, I worked with a very divided city council in which the actions of individual members and their collective differences had caused the city manager to resign. They came to our first session filled with anger and blame directed at each other and at the departed chief executive. But as they began to talk together, they agreed that they shared a common goal, of attracting and retaining a new manager who would be able to lead them, and the city, more effectively. They acknowledged that their current dysfunctional rancor would discourage high caliber candidates from even applying to the position they desperately needed to fill. Their collective goal was bigger than their individual differences, so they began to open themselves up enough to discuss the assumptions about roles and behaviors that were resulting in the negativity and destructiveness. Once they moved past the accusations to allow for an open and honest reflection on their own problematic actions, they became aligned in a way that helped them move forward productively for their own governance team, as well as for the benefit of the city they were each obliged to serve.

## **Seeking a New Way of Doing Business**

If the evolutionary notion of conflict is a signal to the body that it is time to generate the hormones that lead to fight-or-flight, the twenty-first century version is a signal from the organization or the relationship that there are problems needing attention. When I have had the opportunity to work with schools that are formally considered to be underperforming either by the faculty itself, the district, or

the state, I have often found that the faculty was experiencing a level of interpersonal conflict that they felt was impeding their ability to successfully address issues related to student performance. In one case, the toxic interpersonal interactions of members of the faculty in general, and the leadership team in particular, included personal attacks and bitter interactions that left the staff members feeling divided and isolated. The resolution for them involved naming the competitive, adversarial behaviors and developing new habits designed to resolve divisive issues, rather than fighting over or avoiding them.

### **Conflict Resolution Begins With the Self**

The solution begins with the self. Anyone who aspires to leadership must look inward with an eye and ear open to the probability that changing the world will start by changing oneself through a fundamental commitment to inquire and to learn. The most important skill that was cultivated on that school leadership team was the courage to name the attacking behaviors. The team members needed to recognize that they had been incapacitated by their own fight-or-flight responses, which in this case either meant standing by silently and fearfully, or engaging in verbal attacks out of habit and frustration. They eventually learned to look inward first to address the fears and the attitudes that were programming their habitual conflict.

Once they began to describe the behaviors without accusation or assumptions about intent, they began to realize that they were interacting with each other more respectfully and productively. It is futile to blame others in our interpersonal or organizational conflicts because in a conflicted situation there is very little we can do to change other people, but a lot we can do to change ourselves. As we will explore further in Chapter 3, examining our own motives and interactions makes us much more able to impact others, and ultimately the world around us.

### **Collaborate Because It Delivers Better Results**

Most of us probably cultivate a set of problem-solving strategies for very pragmatic and practical reasons. When there is conflict that is keeping us from getting important work done, we strive to resolve it so that we can get on with our business. I experienced this very reasonable strategy almost two decades ago when I worked with colleagues to repair an educational labor relationship that had become

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so dysfunctional that it was impeding the ability of educators to work together to support student learning. In fact, we used the dysfunction as a rationale to sell our constituencies on the idea of cooperating with one another, rather than fighting. We pointed out to them that we could get settlements just as beneficial as had been produced adversarially, and with much less disruption.

As we began to move forward collaboratively, we realized that a greater purpose was being served with the potential to provide our organization and its members with bigger payoffs if we could align ourselves as partners around our collective tasks, such as improving employee performance or wrestling with budget deficits. More important, we have gradually been discovering that the business of educating students in an increasingly high-stakes environment for the neediest of learners is so difficult and complex that it requires faculty to be able to collaborate together to improve teaching and learning throughout the organization. I see this same hunger in many other organizations whose adversarial rancor and discord impede the ability to pass ballot measures and bond issues and to effectively deliver core services. As alignment occurs, leaders begin to pick up the phone and call each other before small organizational rubs become huge conflicts. More important, key actors already know what to do, because they have had deep conversations about what is important, and they have empowered one another to act on behalf of those core needs.

### SUMMARY

Public sector organizations in today's complex environment require high levels of collaboration, communication, and problem solving to meet the high expectations of the society they serve. This means that the people in those organizations must manage habitual fight-or-flight responses to conflict in order to find ways of interacting that promote more creative and broadly beneficial outcomes. Leaders responsible for producing these outcomes can utilize natural principles of alignment to develop a level of communication and interaction that many people never suspect is possible.

Cultivating an ability to detect coherence (or incoherence) and to promote the attitudes and skills that help create it should not only produce better outcomes for the organization and its stakeholders, but

it should also support a stronger community and more fulfilling lives for the individual members. But the ability to lead groups to greater alignment and more effective agreements begins with the self, and the ability of each prospective leader to understand how his or her own behaviors can promote conflict or alignment in the broader group. Chapter 2 will consider how an individual leader can cultivate habits designed to promote more effective agreements in groups.