

Leading Renewal

The Value of Positive Turbulence



Leaders who develop the ability to read turbulence and who respond to it by bringing a controlled amount of it into the organization create a condition of organizational renewal called *positive turbulence*—the primary means of ensuring that organizations not only survive change but also prosper from it.

Probably the most important challenge a leader faces today is building an organization that continually renews itself—an organization in which creativity (the generation of new and useful ideas) and innovation (the successful implementation of these ideas) are ongoing. This challenge is heightened by the constant—many would say accelerating—change that has been buffeting us all.

I have spent many years working with and studying organizations seeking renewal in the midst of such turbulence, and I have found that there are leaders who are able to connect the two. They have developed the ability to read turbulence and have responded to it, not by attempting to wall it out but by bringing a controlled amount of it into the organiza-

tion. In doing this they have created a condition of renewal that I refer to as *positive turbulence*. In my view, creating positive turbulence can be the primary means of promoting renewal so that organizations not only survive change but also prosper from it.

DIFFERENCE AND SPEED

Reading turbulence is a continual activity: the leader must understand the multitude of forces that the organization is subject to, then decide which forces to bring in and how to do it, then gauge the turbulence that is brought in so it may be kept positive.

Turbulence can be difficult to read because it can occur in so many inter-related forms: information, the competitive environment, organizational structure—to name only a few. In the discussion that follows I refer primarily to informational turbulence, which may be the most important

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by **Stanley S. Gryskiewicz**

form at present, but the same principles apply to any of the forms.

In addition, the experience of turbulence is not just a matter of external events. How one reacts to these events also plays a part. Therefore, in order to read turbulence, you must understand both its objective and subjective aspects.

Turbulence possesses two basic objective aspects: degree of difference and speed. The former has to do with how different new information coming into the organization is from previous information, and the latter has to do with the rate at which the information arrives.

Likewise, there are two basic subjective aspects: receptivity and the capacity to reframe. Individuals differ widely in their ability to accept different information and in their style of processing it. And information is only data until it is converted into something meaningful—which usually involves looking at it from a new frame of reference.

Objective Aspects

When new—that is, different—information comes into the organization, turbulence occurs. The amount of turbulence depends largely on just how different the information is and how fast it is coming in.

If the difference is small, you can expect the turbulence to be slight; it may even go unnoticed. If, however, the difference is large, you can expect the turbulence to be great and probably experienced as threatening and disruptive. Very large differences, and therefore very great turbulence, will likely stimulate the organizational equivalent of antibodies, with white corpuscles surrounding the new information and isolating it. In some cases, an extremely large difference may paralyze the organization and send it into a downward slide. Trying to deal with new information that is coming in very fast is like trying to get a drink of water from a high-speed hose. It's messy and it hurts.

(Conversely, dealing with information that comes in too slowly is like trying to get a drink from a faucet that is shut off but leaking.)

It should be noted that speed is often closely related to volume; a fire hose is hard to drink from not only because of the speed of the water but also because of the amount of it.

It is also not uncommon for new information to present itself both at a high rate of speed *and* with a high degree of difference. You can get help in reading these objective aspects of turbulence from the news media (particularly the business press). The media are particularly on the lookout for information with a high degree of difference. They are, of course, less likely to report on an event that exhibits little difference. And even if the degree of difference is high, they may miss information when the speed is low. If the time between the first and the second reports of new information is great, they may not connect the two events and see the emerging pattern. Thus, it is important to bring experience and a good memory to bear when you are reading turbulence.

Subjective Aspects

Not surprisingly, the subjective aspects of turbulence are more complex than the objective ones. Three things have an effect on how turbulence is received: creativity style (problem-defining behavior), tolerance of ambiguity, and the ability to make remote associations.

A person's creativity style is how he or she responds when presented with a problem to solve: is the problem accepted as defined or is it redefined?

Some people become irritated or anxious when they find themselves in conditions of uncertainty, when they cannot anticipate likely outcomes or understand exactly what is driving the situation. Others manage uncertainty by simply ignoring it. Research suggests that the best way to manage it is to develop a stance in which you entertain ambiguity.

Ambiguity is a state in which many possibilities exist. Complete ambiguity is, practically speaking, the same thing as chaos, and all of us are nervous in total chaos. So we all have an urge to impose order. Some of us move very quickly to close boundaries and contain ambiguity. Others prefer to entertain ambiguity or at least some element of it; they are in less of a rush to nail everything down, preferring to leave a little wiggle room in the product or process they are creating.

Many of us by temperament and training find it easier and very practical to think and speak in controlled, concise terms. We stay on the subject at hand; one idea follows closely after another in an orderly manner. This style of thinking has been called *linear*. Others see that there are advantages to occasionally departing from linear thinking. They have been known to unleash their thoughts to range about like hunting dogs in a wide-open field. The term *remote association* is often applied to this style of thinking.

In addition to how we take in turbulence, our capacity to make something out of what we receive is crucial. The capacity to reframe is probably the master key that unlocks everything else. It thus relates to all the responses to turbulence that are detailed below.

Reframing is the ability to look at something from a slightly different angle—or several different angles—in order to find new meaning. How

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we experience turbulence depends on how much sense we can make of new information that is, by its nature, not fully clear.

An example of reframing can be seen in the reaction to the incredible growth of new technology. No one is unaware of new technology; it is different enough and happening fast enough that we cannot help but notice. But some people actively wonder what it means—for a company or an industry or an organization. What new perspective will explain it best?

The subjective aspect of turbulence is further complicated by the fact that it occurs at three interrelated but distinct organizational levels: the individual, the group or team, and the organization as a whole. In order to read turbulence effectively, you must pay attention to each of these levels.

USING TURBULENCE

Responding to turbulence should also be a continual activity. Because turbulence can be so threatening, leaders have often responded to it by trying to build organizations that wall it out or eliminate it. I believe that many systematic management techniques, although they have worthwhile goals and incorporate potentially useful procedures, are actually often driven by the desire of leaders to eliminate turbulence.

Leaders who succeed in eliminating turbulence make the organization comfortable for a time but cut off its sources of renewal—its ability to respond creatively to change.

In order for an organization to continually renew itself, it must incorporate, in a controlled and thoughtful way, some of the turbulence it is surrounded by, particularly changing information. There are various mechanisms (which I have seen tested over the years by various organizations) that can be used to create positive turbulence and then to

pay disciplined attention to new information, both internally and at the periphery of the organization. These mechanisms can be grouped according to the subjective level that each focuses on.

Individual Level

There are a number of mechanisms that work on the individual level. These, of course, add to an individual's knowledge, but they also serve to bring new information, and therefore some controlled turbulence, into the organization.

Publications. A good means of bringing in new information is to have professionals subscribe to publications from fields outside their areas of expertise and find one that is clearly ahead of current thinking.

In addition, there are publications, which I call *credible fringe business periodicals*, that can be very helpful in bringing in new information. These are periodicals that although currently at the periphery of a field contain ideas of value. The list of such publications that I consult includes *Fast Company*, *Strategy & Leadership*, *Red Herring*, and *Upside*.

These are primarily business publications because that is the world in which I live and work and also because overall business and economic trends are significant for all industries. Leaders should develop their own lists of credible fringe periodicals that depict the signs of change within their own fields, those that challenge the established way.

Conferences. Sending individuals to one conference a year outside their professional fields will provide an unsettling source of new information. (This should not take the place of conferences that people attend for professional and personal growth.)

Networks. Encouraging individuals to take part in professional networks is another way to bring new information into the organization. Such networks function best when members actively participate and give

to, not just take from, the experience of the network.

One very intriguing variation on this mechanism is the internal network—a collaboration of organizational members who get together either formally or informally to share ideas and brainstorm solutions. Organizations that employ internal networks include Motorola, Hallmark, Kodak, the U.S. Air Force, and Hoechst-Celanese.

Travel and foreign assignments. I don't think any single activity does more for bringing new information into an organization than travel. Consider the case of Hallmark. At this company, both artists and writers are sent outside the organization to attend major openings at museums around the world or to soak up atmosphere and information. Hallmark refers to this as *creative travel*. I call such trips *mini-sabbaticals*. Travelers are expected to come back and use their new stimulation to suggest new product lines.

Closely related to travel is the mechanism of assigning key people to positions in overseas offices, a practice that is increasing. For example, 75 percent of 3M's top managers have lived abroad for at least three years. The company actively looks for opportunities to send managers abroad for experience, thus exposing them to new information.

Internal sabbaticals. In education and the military, sabbaticals are common and well established as a source of physical and psychological renewal. The idea is not as often used in business, but there is no reason it should not be. Again, Hallmark provides us a model. This company gives employees a way to be exposed to some new thinking or to learn a new skill through what we might call *internal sabbaticals*.

Changing roles. Another way to generate new information (at least information that is new to a specific locale in the organization) is to move individuals outside their well-learned roles or functional positions.

Team Level

The following mechanisms can be used on the team level to produce positive turbulence.

Diversity of membership. The single most important strategy for building positive turbulence into a team is diversity of membership. When members have a broad range of skills and backgrounds, then the information the team generates will not be uniform. One good way to accomplish this diversity is to draw on people from different functional areas—for instance, manufacturing, marketing, finance, and human resources. If it is impossible to do this (for example, because the team's purpose requires a focused effort in a particular discipline), then diversity can be accomplished by putting people with different personalities on the team or by rotating in new members.

Outside experts. A team can also generate new information by bringing in experts—from either inside or outside the organization—in subjects related to but not exactly the same as the area the team is working on. Such experts are not team members and may have contact with the team only once or twice.

Creative thinking. In order for a team to generate new information and new ideas, it is necessary that both its individual members and the team as a whole learn to avoid stereotyped thinking and, as people say, to think outside the box. In my experience, this thinking needs to be done systematically, and there are various methods available.

Stirring. In order to keep the information churning within a team, the members should have ongoing contact—rather than just coming together at regular, sometimes lengthy, intervals. There are various ways to do this: for instance, teams can hold daily mini-meetings in which members provide information on where they are with respect to their projects or assignments. Even if it is common for peo-

ple to be at the same place today that they were the day before, this will stimulate movement.

Another way to stir the pot is to locate members together as much as possible. This will increase their contact and promote serendipity conversations in the halls.

Technology. It is, of course, often impossible to bring team members together physically. They may be in different buildings, states, or countries. The advances in communications technology can help with this. E-mail and group decision-making software can help members exchange information regularly and quickly. In fact, this technology can more than offset distance—that's why it is used even by people who aren't geographically dispersed. It facilitates the circulation of information, which increases the frequency with which new information is generated.

Organizational Level

There are many mechanisms that can be used on the organizational level to promote a condition of positive turbulence.

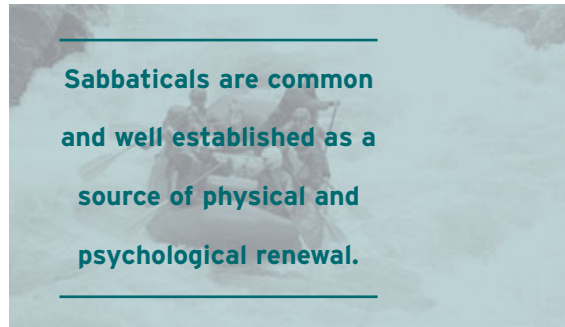
Guest experts. Bell Laboratories is a classic example of an organization that successfully renews itself, coming up with novel and useful ideas in the communications arena. Since its inception, Bell Laboratories has averaged more than two new patents a day. Besides hiring talented experts in particular fields and providing them with resources such as time, materials, and other talented people just like them, it brings in people who can describe the thinking found in tangentially related fields of knowledge.

One forum for this type of stimulation is a monthly event to which outsiders are invited; its sole purpose is to provide some provocative thinking and even outrageous ideas to the lab scientists who choose to attend.

Two criteria have been put in place that go a long way toward guaranteeing the high quality of each presenta-

tion: the person presenting must be a recognized world expert in his or her field and the expertise of the invited presenter must not currently exist inside the laboratory itself.

Corporation-wide trade shows. It is a fact of human nature that we accord more weight to the words of outsiders than to those of our immediate colleagues. (Witness the phenomenon of outside consultants.) But we would be foolish indeed to ignore the talent at home. The bright, clever,



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maybe even off-the-wall thinkers in our own organizations have the potential to perform the same function as outside experts—to generate information that is different. This can be accomplished through the mechanism of what I call *corporation-wide trade shows*. People can learn what their colleagues in other departments, divisions, and even subsidiary companies are doing in a show-and-tell format.

Corporation-wide trade shows can be especially valuable to very large organizations, those with separate operating divisions that traditionally have had very little to do with one another.

Workforce diversity. It takes only brief reflection to realize that the potential for different information is greatly enhanced in organizations that have a wide cross section of employees. Diversity in the workplace is thus a helpful mechanism for generating positive turbulence. The best way to achieve this diversity is to hire it.

Alliances, mergers, and joint ventures. Working closely with other

organizations is a good way to bring in new information. Of course, this needs to be done carefully so that the turbulence it generates is kept positive. Its success also has much to do with the circumstances—remember



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the aspects of speed and degree of difference.

Mergers are much in the news these days. The worst case is when the two organizations are extremely similar; then there is great overlap and redundancy without a single bit of new information. The best case is when the two organizations are reasonably different; then there can be synergy, successful collaboration, and new approaches to long-standing problems.

Crisis response. No sane person would suggest deliberately engineering a crisis as a way of stimulating renewal, but the unfortunate fact is that crises do occur and they do have to be dealt with. When trouble strikes an organization that already has a creative climate, often that crisis is the catalyst for significant innovation.

Listening posts. Truly listening to customers in their own settings provides invaluable information—as well as giving direction, uncovering opportunities, motivating the product development team, and stimulating creative thinking. The type of listening I am talking about here goes far beyond the findings of market research. This listening supplements and energizes the numeric conclusions and links the actions of a product developer directly with an end user.

In 1975, Theodore Levitt's groundbreaking article in the *Harvard Business Review* on marketing myopia suggested listening to clients to identify gaps in the services or products offered. Note that Levitt didn't suppose that the client would give detailed specifications for the service or product he or she wanted—though sometimes that happens. Rather, the client, if gently encouraged, can describe an outcome or a gizmo that would be beneficial. The organization can then ask R&D or product development, Can you design a process that will deliver outcome X to clients? or, Can we make a gizmo that's like our product Y but has the following characteristics?

Interaction

I must point out here that by identifying a mechanism with a particular level I do not mean to imply that it does not have an effect on other levels. The information-generated turbulence experienced by an individual will most likely have an effect on the teams he or she serves on and also an impact on the organization as a whole. The most intense effect, however, will in most cases be at the level the turbulence is introduced. (And all turbulence is experienced to some degree on the individual level.)

I have presented the mechanisms in levels because to promote renewal it is necessary to have positive turbulence at all levels. The best way to ensure this is to apply mechanisms consciously at each one.

PROCESS OF RENEWAL

The mechanisms described above, plus many others I don't have space to describe, are means of initiating and controlling turbulence, making it positive so it can contribute to the process of organizational renewal. To use these mechanisms effectively, you should have a sense of the basics of this process.

You must overcome a reliance on single-source information. The turbulence of having new and different information come into the organization will lead to new ideas as people try to make sense of the information and generate explanations for it. Some of these ideas, if the organization has ways to pay attention to them and consider their possible application, will be seen to be useful in helping the organization meet the needs of its customers more effectively. This is the creative part of the process of renewal.

The organization will then do the work of implementing these ideas, and the informational turbulence will generate ideas that will facilitate implementation. This is the innovative part of the process.

If the mechanisms of positive turbulence are applied systematically and over time, thus helping ensure that creativity and innovation are ongoing, then the organization will in fact be likely to renew itself. And if this process is made a central organizational activity, then it can truly be said that a climate of renewal has been created.

In practice, the parts of the renewal process can happen so rapidly, and interact in so many ways, that they can be difficult to distinguish. You may find yourself talking about using a particular mechanism to promote creativity, skipping positive turbulence and not mentioning renewal. Nevertheless, all the basic parts of the process are at work.

Reading and responding to turbulence are simultaneous and ongoing activities, requiring leaders to pay attention to such issues as how the subjective aspects of receptivity (creativity style, tolerance of ambiguity, and the ability to make remote associations) work at different levels and play out in different mechanisms. If a leader carries out this reading and responding systematically, the complexity can be turned into renewal. 🌱

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