

# THE CONSCIOUS ORGANIZATION:

## WORKPLACE FOR THE SELF-ACTUALIZED

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**A** BRAHAM MASLOW'S FAMOUS HIERARCHY OF Needs defines "self-actualization" as a state sought by all human beings once we have satisfied the more basic needs of survival, sexual gratification and belonging. Carl Rogers, one of the founders of humanistic psychology, defines it as man's tendency to actualize himself, to become his potentialities. As we humans continue to evolve toward self-actualization there will be a concurrent need for our organizations to follow suit.

In the 1980s, in his seminal book *The Global Brain*, British futurist Peter Russell pointed out the coming "Age of Consciousness" – an era when reaching our full potentiality as human beings is much more the focus of our collective energies than at present – largely survival, conflict and consumption. As this emerging focus becomes more widely recognized and people continue on their individual paths toward self-actualization, the enterprises, institutions and companies where they come together to work will be changing dramatically. If they don't, the fate of these organizations is simple: they will die because people who are becoming self-actualized won't want to work in them. Organizations that

wish to attract more enlightened workers will need to transform their cultures and work environments so that they are more conscious, purging themselves of the existing dysfunction so prevalent in today's work environments. I call this "the conscious organization."

### WHAT IS THE CONSCIOUS ORGANIZATION?

The Conscious Organization is not an end state where every worker is "certified" self-actualized or enlightened, where each and every element of the company, division, bureau, agency or institution is spotlessly cleaned of any residual dysfunction. The Conscious Organization is one that is continually examining itself, committed to becoming as self-aware and responsible as it can at any given time in its life. It purposely creates a very low tolerance for dysfunction. It possesses the collective will to be vigilant about unresolved issues that might fester under the surface of awareness or otherwise go unnoticed like they might in most organizations today.

Most of our existing organizations, including our corporations, endure some degree of bureaucracy – where the focus is more on the internal pathologies of their workers and less on the needs of their customers. Most organizations have developed a tolerance for certain shadows or dark behaviours that detract from them being as effective and vital as enterprises and workplaces. They have become resigned to this less-than-fully-functional state as "the best they can do under the circumstances," a condition that gives rise to mediocrity and low morale.

Conscious Organizations, or anyone involved with them, will more quickly recognize an unwanted quality, procedure, practice or other element of its culture because it has built-in vigilance for that which is not conscious. This vigilance is explicitly part of its culture. Once recognized, a rallying cry goes out and the organization's resources are marshalled toward "cleaning up" that area and making it more conscious. This could be compared to how the human body's immune system responds to an infection or any invading toxic agent.

So what do I mean by "conscious" in this context? Becoming conscious is becoming aware of something then acting responsibly in light of the new awareness.

It is not synonymous with awareness alone; it involves both. To paraphrase a Japanese proverb, awareness without action is a waste of time. Knowing something is wrong or can be improved upon without doing anything about it can also be painful.

Pinning down an exact definition of this ineffable human characteristic may be impossible, but let's see how the dots show up so we can agree on a general common understanding. Let's start with dictionaries.

Here is *Merriam-Webster's* definition:

- a: the quality or state of being aware especially of something within oneself;
- b: the state or fact of being conscious of an external object, state, or fact;
- c: awareness; *especially* : concern for some social or political cause.

The *International Dictionary of Psychology* defines it thusly:

Consciousness: the having of perceptions, thoughts and feelings; awareness. The term is impossible to define except in terms that are unintelligible without a grasp of what consciousness means [...] Nothing worth reading has been written about it.

*Behavioural Brain Sciences* journal states:

Consciousness is like the Trinity; if it is explained so that you understand it, it hasn't been explained correctly."

Sigmund Freud writes, "What is meant by consciousness we need not discuss – it is beyond all doubt."

T.S. Eliot has something to say too: "Consciousness, we shall find, is reducible to relations between objects, and objects we shall find to be reducible to relations between different states of consciousness; and neither point of view is more nearly ultimate than the other."

Why is consciousness needed today? Why should we work at creating organizational cultures that are more conscious? Two thoughts expressed by 20th Century visionaries. The late Vaclav Havel, first President of the Czech Republic and Nobel Laureate, writes: "Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our being as humans, and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed – be it ecological, social, demographic or a general breakdown - will be unavoidable."

*Time Magazine's* Man of the Century, Albert Einstein, writes: "A human being is part of the whole, called by us 'Universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest – a

kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desire and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

Futurist Russell says this: "The biggest hurdle to defining consciousness is the word itself. A noun is inappropriate. Consciousness does not exist as a 'thing'. It is not a 'thing' to be known, but knowing itself."

#### B E C O M I N G   A W A R E

Becoming aware involves one's state of mind. It invites self-exploration and self-examination. It means waking up to all that is going on around you, not just the matters that have your regular attention but everything in your environment. It means not only being aware of the immediate task but the larger purpose it serves, the effects it has on the organization and the world, i.e., the larger context. It means having some sense of the meaning for what you are doing and how it contributes to the whole.

Gaining higher levels of awareness is largely a personal undertaking but corporate professional development programs have added resources for this kind of work in recent years. Many corporate leaders have committed themselves to paths of perpetual development and lifetime learning as a means of sustaining self-examination in pursuit of self-actualization.

A high state of awareness includes the absence of denial of any kind. It means "having your lights on" at all times and remaining fully awake while you are at work. This awareness allows you to notice things that do not serve the overall functionality and effectiveness of the organization. These things can include collusions of various kinds where someone is allowed to get by with some behaviour that diminishes from the organization's purpose or goes against its best interests in any way. Condoning these behaviours is similar to how codependents enable their families in remaining dysfunctional. These tolerated behaviours could include cheating, dishonesty of any kind, gossip, whining and complaining about something but doing nothing to change it, tolerating incompetence and tardiness, discrimination or a myriad of other behaviours.

These collusions can also include attitudes that divide people, such as racism, sexism, rankism or any other isms that separate people and diffuse the output of human endeavour. They can also include attitudes within the corporate culture that place the internal needs and wants of management and employees

ahead of the customers' needs which fosters deeper bureaucracy and lower efficacy.

Avoidance or denial of anything "dark" or "bad" eliminates any chance of becoming aware – individually or organizationally. Tendencies for this collective avoidance are quite prevalent in many of today's corporations.

#### GETTING INTO ACTION

Once awareness about any dysfunction is present it's time to *do* something – to begin correcting. It's time to responsibly act.

What does "responsibly act" mean? It means engaging in a process of discovery and responding as if you've seen something for the very first time. Response is a root of "responsibility" or the ability to respond. Reacting prematurely, like rushing to action as soon as the "bad" behaviour is discovered, is often not really responsible. Responsibility includes thought, choice, comparison to one's values, and gaining consensus among the parties. Being "able to respond" with full awareness is not accomplished by merely reacting to an undesired condition.

Examples of less-responsible reactions might include the immediate firing of a salesperson when it is learned that he or she misinformed a potential customer, learning a "lie" had been told, or hiring a diversity consultant as soon as some prejudice is discovered, or issuing a righteously indignant memo to all staff that the "bad" behaviour "will not be tolerated."

These reactions may be coming from a place of protecting an image – either an individual's or the organization's. Take time to ask: Where does this unwanted behaviour have its roots? What about the organization's culture yielded this result? This approach examines the system for the root cause or source, not simply the symptom or the actor/player. A systemic approach to correction will likely yield lasting results rather than band aid quick fixes.

Use the situation to learn and grow, not only for the people involved, but for the organization.

#### NEW MEASURES OF PERFORMANCE

Consciousness does not only play a part in becoming aware of "problems;" it can also create new awareness about matters previously off the routine "radar screen." Making things better often involves looking at entirely new topics, things that can improve the organizational culture, reputation, product performance and customer service, not just "fix" the problems.

For instance, a Conscious Organization might periodically re-examine its purpose – why it exists, why it

offers its product or service, what its core values and priorities are. This can be difficult work since we all tend to become emotionally attached to things when they are close to our hearts or minds or wallets.

An organization which holds honesty (both factual and emotional honesty) and integrity high on its list of core ideals might want to look beyond the mere "misinformation" given by the salesperson in the earlier example and search for where and how this happened. It might question whether or not it was an isolated incident or a symptom of a larger more insidious "virus" in the core body of the company. Is a flawed system behind the dysfunctions?

Once the process of becoming more conscious has begun and intentional action has been implemented, the organization's values and core ideologies need to be re-examined in light of this new consciousness. These core ideals might change constantly as the organization continues to become more and more conscious. Since people and organizations can only strive for total consciousness, the process of becoming more and more conscious is integrated into the "way of life" for the organization; this is part of what a Conscious Organization is – a group of people who are constantly examining their own individual and collective consciousness.

#### CREATING A CONSCIOUS CORPORATE CULTURE

I know from personal experience that a commitment to becoming conscious on a personal level is a lifelong adventure. It means constant vigilance, impeccable discernment, and an ongoing willingness to continuously examine one's life, one's values, and one's relationship to oneself, others, and the world. It allows for falling short of these ideals from time to time; this is part of being human after all. Honest attempts to keep these shortfalls to a minimum, however, make for a sound underpinning for a conscious organizational culture.

Since an organization is a collection of individuals who have come together for some common purpose, a natural conclusion would be that an organizational commitment to being conscious requires the same continuous exploration and re-examination that is needed for personal consciousness. A core ideal of a company wishing to be a Conscious Organization needs to include this commitment to continuous self-examination throughout its life.

Since the Conscious Organization is the opposite of a dysfunctional one, its commitment to explore any "shadows" that come to light is totally contrary to the less-healthy company that often serves as a refuge for co-dependent

behaviours, underperformers and marginally competent people. As many mental health professionals will tell you, a primary co-dependent behaviour is keeping secrets and avoiding whistle-blowing on any matters that the “conspiracy” wants to hide.

One way to cure a dysfunctional system – be it a family or an organization – is an intervention by people who will no longer buy into the “conspiracy of silence” or who have felt enough pain and can’t stand it anymore. Such interventions are usually aimed at a person or a number of people within the group. They often resemble a sort of tough-love “ambush” since the targets for the intervention would probably avoid it if they were aware of what was planned.

In contrast, people in a Conscious Organization culture are open to learning about any unwanted patterns and breaking through any barriers they may have. Similar to when a person committed to a path of self-actualization invites friends to provide constructive feedback that will allow him or her to grow, the corporate culture of the Conscious Organization includes this permission, both explicitly and implicitly. Having a trusting and healthy relationship with co-workers and the organization’s mission is of paramount importance, far more important than an individual’s need to maintain their image, the illusion of control, or remain in denial about something that violates their core values.

In stark contrast to traditional ambush-like interventions which may happen in extremely dysfunctional organizations, people in Conscious Organizations welcome someone revealing any behaviour, policies or practices which do not serve the group’s greater consciousness and functionality.

The Conscious Organization is one where the lights are always ready to shine wherever darkness is found. It is a fit for people who are striving to be more conscious themselves and are seeking work environments that support and stimulate their individual growth as conscious beings. Everybody in the Conscious Organization knows the discovery process and the enlightenment that accompanies it is valuable and takes responsibility for calling attention to it.

The resulting organizational culture invites and welcomes competence, interdependence, openness, honesty, team play, ethical behaviour, self-examination, functionality, and peak performance. People attracted to work in such an organization will be those who are interested in or already committed to self-actualization. Imagine the power and effectiveness a workforce like this can offer the world! 

