

Reprinted from *Future of Work Agenda*
December 2005

Notes from the Field: Something's Happening Here

by Jim Ware

Imagine for a moment that you're the newly-appointed CEO of a Fortune 500 company. You're standing at a podium in the company cafeteria, dressed in your brand-new \$1500 Brooks Brothers suit. You're holding your first open meeting with your new company's employees.

You've just delivered a few opening remarks about how pleased you are to have joined the organization, and how much you're looking forward to working with everyone. Now you turn to the staff with a smile and say, "So, what's on your minds? What can I tell you about myself and my vision for the company?"

And the first question (from a 30-something kid in khakis and a sweater) is:

"What makes you worth a million and a half a year when I'm only getting paid \$50,000?"

Welcome to the executive suite.

That scene actually took place recently. Charlie and I heard the story from a good friend and colleague who was there, but who shall remain nameless for rather obvious reasons (it's not just the New York Times that needs anonymous sources). He didn't ask the CEO that question himself, but he did ask us, "What's going on? Everyone I talk to and work with these days seems restless, frustrated, on edge. While I share some of that young guy's feelings, I'm appalled that he was rude enough to ask it like that."

We were taken aback too, but mostly we were surprised that the kid had the *cojones* to stand up to the CEO like that – not that he was angry about the pay differential, but that he was so upset that he was so willing to "tell it like it is" – or at least how it is to him.

But as we thought about it, this isn't just another case of the younger generation not knowing the "rules" or not being polite enough to stay quiet. We're convinced there's something much, much deeper going on.

Consider for a moment several other recent events that also reflect unease, discomfort, frustration, angst, and even anger, about 21st century life (maybe Jimmy Carter's famous comment about "malaise" was 25 years too soon).

Start with the most recent heated debates in the U.S. Congress (in both houses) about the Iraq war. They're striking mostly for their outright hostility and complete lack of civility than they are for any progress they've generated in creating understanding of what's going on or consensus about what to do. It looks to us like people on both sides of the aisle are incredibly angry about a situation they can't seem to resolve and are just taking it out on each other.

Then consider the difficulty a middle manager we know was having completing performance reviews for several of his subordinates. They're all part of a global team focused on infrastructure productivity improvement, and he can't figure out how to isolate their individual contributions. As he put it, "None of them can claim to have produced any savings on their own, but the team as a whole has taken out over \$2 million in costs over the last six months. I just can't sort out who did what."

I think our world (both at work and everywhere else) has gotten so complex and interconnected that a whole lot of folks (just about all of us, in fact) are feeling powerless, unable to have any impact on anything that matters to them, and ready to pull out, hunker down, and focus on their own lives – often to the exclusion of the world around them.

Our friend who told us about the attack on his new CEO mentioned that he feels like the folks up north of the Arctic Circle who get edgier and edgier every spring as they wait to hear the sound of thawing ice cracking on the rivers and in the bays. That's a very important event because it signals that spring is coming, but they don't really know when it's going to happen (see this month's "[In Our Humble Opinion: Waiting for the Ice to Crack](#)," for more of why that's an important insight).

The waiting for something they can't control creates a lot of anxiety. They get nervous because they can't get started on their spring chores until the ice breaks up, so they often take it out on each other – being cranky, short-tempered, and even (believe it or not) turning to certain forms of liquid refreshment to quench their thirst and help them tolerate the uncertainty.

Well, we think the whole world is going through that kind of uncertainty right now. We're waiting for the ice to break. The "game" has changed, but we don't know why. And more importantly, we don't know the rules for new game, or how to succeed at it. That's a tough place to be, and we're all getting edgier and edgier about it.

Wherever we turn, things aren't going right, and it feels like we can't do much about it. The weather has gone crazy (tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes – when do the locusts arrive?). Energy prices are completely unpredictable. We feel threatened by the possibilities of terrorism, we can't seem to get on track in the Middle East, and major companies are declaring bankruptcy almost every day (if General Motors goes under, what company can we count on?). Health care costs are skyrocketing, the federal deficit is exploding, the stock market (and therefore everyone's 401K) seems to be going nowhere, and there's practically no job certainty anywhere any more.

And on top of that, the kind of work that many of us do has gotten more and more abstract, with less and less connection to tangible, measurable results. At the same time, we're more dependent on others than ever before. We work in teams (or as part of extended value chains) with colleagues we've never met (and who often don't speak the same language or live on the same continent). And we're doing everything in less and less predictable ways. We move around a lot, no two days follow the same pattern, we often don't see our boss or teammates for days or weeks at a time, and we can't be sure the damn computer will work today like it did yesterday (and if it doesn't we've lost control once again).

No wonder we're so anxious.

So what do anxious folks do who can't figure out what or who to blame? They strike out at authority figures. They challenge their leaders. They "retreat" to their families and their local

communities. They hunker down. They look for alternative sources of comfort and for strong leaders who they hope will make sense of it all.

As we talk to corporate folks around the country and continue our quest to understand how to construct positive organizational change (in spite of it all, we're still optimists), we're thinking of constructing a "Near-death Index" as an adjunct to the Organizational Assessment System™ described in this month's lead article (How's Your Organizational Health?).

What's a Near-Death Index? Truth is, we haven't actually invented one, but if we did it would be an indicator of just how close to complete collapse an organization (or a society) is. Because, like it or not, that seems to be what it takes to become open to genuine, meaningful change – to put aside old habits and assumptions and embrace transformational change as the only way to survive. As someone once said, "There's nothing like facing hanging in the morning to focus one's mind."

The really sobering thought that keeps us awake all too many nights is that we're starting to think our whole society may be in the throes of a near-death experience (at least we hope it's only a *near* death).

Yet, we remain optimists. If it really does take near-death to drive Big Change, then maybe – just maybe – we're on the brink of something important and positive. We sure as hell hope so! One thing we do know for sure: this isn't a time to predict the future by extrapolating trends.

This is a time of major discontinuity, and for imagining the unimaginable. We need to develop totally new scenarios for the future of work (and of life outside of work). We believe that when the ice finally does break we're going to find that it's completely rebuilt the shore line – and we just might discover we're on a whole new continent.

About the Work Design Collaborative and *Future of Work Agenda*

Future of Work is a global network of resources – practitioners, thought leaders, researchers, and senior consultants – who are committed to building and implementing physical, social, and technology-based work environments that are cost-effective, socially and environmentally responsible, and personally satisfying.

We are focused on defining the future of work and helping our members and clients achieve new levels of workforce and workplace productivity. *Future of Work* produces and distributes management tools, surveys, benchmark databases, white papers and technical reports, conferences and workshops, newsletters, books and articles, and public presentations on the changing nature of work. The Work Design Collaborative, LLC, provides leadership and infrastructure services for the *Future of Work* community.

Future of Work Agenda is a free monthly electronic newsletter produced by the *Work Design Collaborative*.

Direct inquiries to either Charles Grantham at +1 928.771.9138, or charlie@thefutureofwork.net, or James Ware at +1 510.558.1434, or jim@thefutureofwork.net