

Creating greatness in the realm beyond systems thinking

by Jack Martin Leith

A contribution to the e-book distributed to participants in [European Sharing on Systems Thinking](#) held in Prague, Czech Republic, 18 – 20 June 2015.



Growing up in an east London undertaker's shop during the 1950s, I was acutely aware of what I now call the 'enterprise ecosystem'.

In this particular case, the ecosystem was a rich one. It consisted of the bereaved; the people who supplied B. Wallis & Son with timber for the coffins, and marble and granite for the headstones; the staff of various cemeteries and crematoria; the coroner's officers and other officials; my father, who managed the shop and did a bit of everything; my mother, who arranged the funerals; other employees, who made coffins, embalmed the deceased, served as pall bearers, drove the hearse and performed other vital tasks; Mr. Cakebread, the part-time bookkeeper; and the man they called 'guvnor'—Mr Wallis himself, the "Son" in the firm's name.

Arranging a funeral is far from simple, and all of these people, some of whom would drink tea with us at our kitchen table, had to work together in order to make the overall experience the best it can be, given the difficult circumstances. There's no service business quite like an undertaker's. You can't take away people's pain, but you can show them human kindness. Yes, B Wallis & Son was a business, but it also provided a service to the community. Its underlying purpose was altruistic.



London Underground system map, 1959 edition.

My interest in systems became apparent very early. A shy introvert and something of a geek, I was fascinated by the workings of the London underground railway and wanted one of those big colourful system maps you see displayed on the walls of tube stations. These weren't available to the public in the 1950s, but London Transport published a free pocket-size version, and Mr. Wallis helped me create a scaled-up map on a large sheet of paper using a ruler and a pair of dividers. This was probably the point at which I became a systems thinker.

Around that time I was given the job of librarian at my junior school. The first thing I did on taking up this prestigious appointment was to carry out a reorganisation. The stock of books was catalogued and rearranged, a new system for borrowing and returning books was introduced, and new opening hours came into effect. Blissfully unaware of the benefits of co-creation, I simply thought up the new system and announced it on a hand-drawn poster.

A year later I became a boarder at a small school in rural Essex, some 60 kilometres from my funeral parlour home. It wasn't long before I discovered how to make long-distance calls from the village phone box for the price of a local call. I kept the boarding house bullies at bay by providing them with a very long routing code that enabled them to phone home for next to nothing. And so the systems thinker and systems designer became a systems hacker.

Several decades later, a friend introduced me to two of [Gregory Bateson's](#) books: *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972), and *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity—Advances in Systems Theory, Complexity & the Human Sciences* (1979). Thus began a quest for the truth about the nature of value and how it is created, how the new comes into being, how this changes into that, and how we can create organisations that enrich the world by generating maximum value for customers, other stakeholders, and the world at large. My enquiries took me into many new realms, including cybernetics, epistemology (how we know what we know), second order change, large group interventions, metamorphology, Taoism, Zen, Toltec wisdom, and other weird and wonderful fields of knowledge.

In 1988 I travelled to Stockholm to take part in the Sixth Annual Symposium on Organization Transformation. This was what's now called an [unconference](#): a participant-led event with no invited speakers and no preset agenda. Over the course of three days I experienced the [Open Space Technology](#) format that Harrison Owen had devised just three years earlier, and it gave my professional life a new focus.

On returning to the UK, I began a new career as an Open Space facilitator, later relocating to Amsterdam, where I established The Centre for Large Group Interventions. CLGI's services were commissioned by a variety of companies, government institutions and non-profit organisations who wished to bring about breakthrough innovation and whole system change with the help of Open Space Technology, [Future Search](#), [Real Time Strategic Change](#), and similar methods. The systems thinker, designer and hacker had evolved into a systems intervener and advocate.

In this article I will be sharing some of my discoveries about innovation, change and value creation, and presenting them in the form of propositions. Some of these run counter to prevailing theories, models and practices, and your deeply held beliefs may be challenged. Should this happen, I suggest that you to put your belief system on hold, keep an open mind, suspend judgement, play with the idea, explore its value-generating potential, and—most importantly—remain curious.

“If you gave me a few seconds to share what I believed could add the most to a person's life I'd say 'be curious'. What about? Everything and everyone. When you're curious, every day is rich.” — Dionne Lew , in [The value of being curious in the modern world](#), on Medium.

The many quotes included in the article show that others are thinking along similar lines, point to sources of additional information, and provide material that you might want to incorporate into future presentations about innovation, change and value creation.

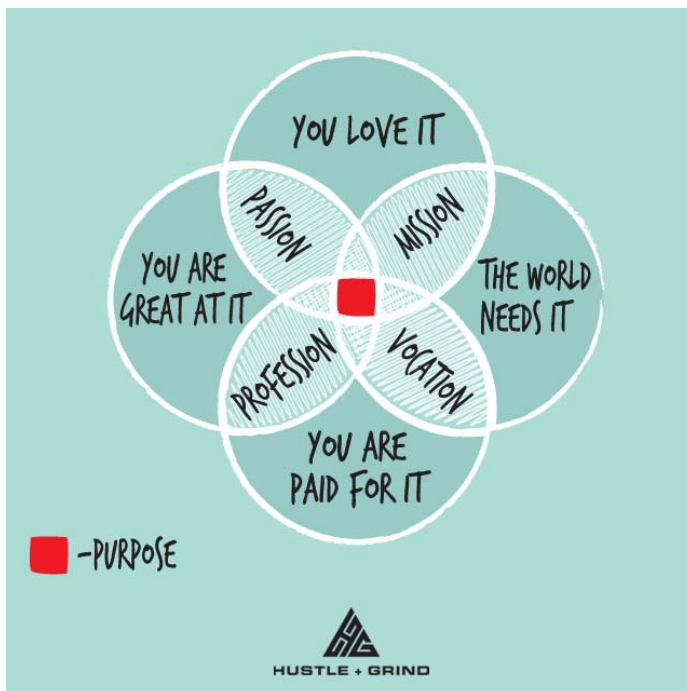
That completes the context-setting material. Now it's time to dive into the content.

What is the purpose of human existence?

This question, which has kept philosophers busy for thousands of years, commonly elicits answers such as these:

- To learn life's lessons.
- To fulfil one's potential.
- To make a difference.
- To make the world a better place.
- To help others.
- To love and be loved.
- It has no purpose.

Humanity's purpose is unknowable, so we must use our intuition to find an explanation that has the strongest resonance for us.



Credit: [Hustle & Grind](#).

Proposition 1: We are here to enrich the world.

“You are not here merely to make a living. You are here in order to enable the world to live more amply, with greater vision, with a finer spirit of hope and achievement. You are here to enrich the world, and you impoverish yourself if you forget the errand.”

—Woodrow Wilson, 28th President of the United States

These words form the basis of my personal philosophy and underpin my professional work.

What is an enterprise for?

Proposition 2: An enterprise exists to enrich the world.

An enterprise exists to create value and make a contribution to society—to enrich the world, thereby enriching itself as a natural consequence.

In a speech given to Hewlett Packard managers in 1960, the firm's co-founder David Packard said "We inevitably comes to the conclusion that a group of people get together and exist as an institution that we call a company so they are able to accomplish something collectively which they could not accomplish separately. They are able to do something worthwhile—they make a contribution to society (a phrase which sounds trite but is fundamental)."

And as Lou Gerstner, IBM's former chairman and CEO, states in his book *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance*: "In the end, an organization is nothing more than the collective capacity of its people to create value."

What is value?

Proposition 3: There are three main types of value: economic, abstract, and experienced.

Economic value means money, which comes in the form of revenue and profit for a business, and in the shape of donations for a charity. However:

"Prosperity in human societies can't be properly understood by looking just at monetary measures, such as income or wealth. Prosperity in a society is the accumulation of solutions to human problems. These solutions run from the prosaic (crunchier potato chips) to the profound (cures for deadly diseases)."

Source: [Redefining capitalism](#), by Eric Beinhocker and Nick Hanauer, in McKinsey Quarterly, September 2014.

[Michael Porter](#), the eminent Harvard Business School professor, has revised his ideas about the nature of value:

"Companies must take the lead in bringing business and society back together. The recognition is there among sophisticated business and thought leaders, and promising elements of a new model are emerging. Yet we still lack an overall framework for guiding these efforts, and most companies remain stuck in a 'social responsibility' mind-set in which societal issues are at the periphery, not the core.

The solution lies in the principle of shared value, which involves creating economic value in a way that also creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges. Businesses must reconnect company success with social progress. Shared value is not social responsibility, philanthropy, or even sustainability, but a new way to achieve economic success. It is not on the margin of what companies do but at the center. We believe that it can give rise to the next major transformation of business thinking."

Source: [Creating Shared Value](#), by Michael E. Porter and Mark R. Kramer, in Harvard Business Review, January-February 2011.

Abstract value is typically seen in value propositions and purpose statements, or scribbled on Post-it Notes during a workshop session. Examples include refreshment, comfort, safety, convenience, and ease of use. Linguists call this kind of a word a nominalisation: the verb 'to feel comfortable' has been converted into an abstract noun, 'comfort'.

Experienced value is not something you can handle, like a dollar bill, nor is it a vague concept such as refreshment. Imagine this: It's a hot day. You are thirsty. You buy a can of beer. You remove the ring-pull and take a swig. Whatever happens next in your sensory system (if it's a positive experience) is what I'm calling experienced value. It's utterly subjective, and cannot be expressed in words.

Anti-value

Proposition 4: The converse of value is anti-value.

Imagine that you take a swig of beer and it tastes vile. You are now experiencing what I call 'anti-value'.

Anti-value is more than dissatisfaction. It manifests as an experience of physical pain or emotional upset arising from a poorly designed or malfunctioning value generator (the can of beer, in our example), or from the denial of previously received and possibly taken-for-granted value.

**When value
is destroyed,
anti-value
fills the void.**

Anti-value often spawns further anti-value. For example, a woman cuts herself when opening a packaged product. She feels physical pain, irritation and regret, and the emotions escalate into anger. The inadequate packaging has now generated considerable anti-value and evoked a negative brand experience.

Fast forward to the next purchase occasion. The woman chooses a different brand, not because it promises greater value, but because she wants to avoid the anti-value she received from the first brand.

Increasingly, collective anti-value is being returned to its perpetrator in the form of badwill.

Enterprises wishing to maximise the generation of ecosystem value must seek out and eliminate any generators of significant anti-value such as the packaging described earlier.

How is value created?

Proposition 5: Value is co-created through the interaction between the value beneficiary (e.g. consumer) and the value generator. It does not reside inside a product, waiting to be delivered as if by FedEx.

A value generator is value in latent form—something tangible or intangible that generates experienced value when the user interacts with it. The main types of value generator are products, services, facilities, establishments and events.

How value is created

Value does not reside inside a product, waiting to be delivered as if by FedEx.

Value is created through an interaction between the user and the value generator. The main types of value generator are products, services, facilities, establishments and events.

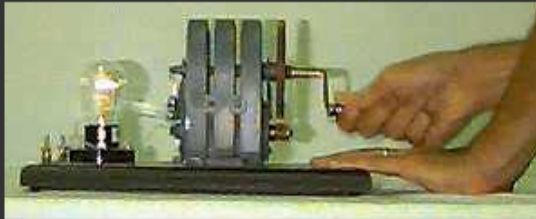


Image credit: North Carolina State University, Department of Physics

In this illustration, the apparatus contains no value. It only represents the **possibility** of value. Value is generated when the operator turns the handle.

Value is subjective. Here, it may be the pleasure of being able to see in what was previously a dark room, or the joy of conducting a scientific experiment.

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If you would like to know more about value co-creation, I recommend [Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing](#) (pdf), a groundbreaking paper written by [Stephen Vargo](#) and [Robert Lusch](#), and published in Journal of Marketing, Vol. 68 (January 2004).

Creating value for the entire enterprise ecosystem

Proposition 6: Greatness-creating enterprises seek to generate maximum value for each member of the enterprise ecosystem—not just favoured stakeholders such as customers and investors.

An enterprise ecosystem is the constellation of organisations—suppliers, customers, investors, government agencies and so on—that affect, and are affected by directly or indirectly, the actions of the enterprise.

This creates a constantly evolving relationship in which each entity must be flexible and adaptable in order to survive, as in a biological ecosystem.

An enterprise ecosystem differs from a stakeholder system in that it includes entities not generally viewed as stakeholder groups, such as [anti-clients](#)¹ (disaffected former customers and non-customers), criminals (part of the ecosystem of a police force), activist groups (for example, Greenpeace, part of the ecosystem of an oil and gas corporation), and competitors (the failure of a business can have a devastating effect on other businesses operating in the same sector).

Note 1: The term 'anti-client' was originated by my friend [Tom Graves](#).

The Ecosystem Value Specification process enables those embarking on a mission-contributing project to examine each constituent of the enterprise ecosystem and determine:

- What existing value must be preserved.
- What new value might be created.
- What anti-value generation should be eliminated.
- What value must be sacrificed for the good of the whole. When value is sacrificed in this way, the consequent generation of anti-value must be foreseen and mitigated, and those experiencing the anti-value may need some form of compensation.

Ecosystem Value Specification

Specify the value to be generated by the innovation or change endeavour

Customise this list of ecosystem constituents as required	PRESERVE existing value	CREATE new value	ELIMINATE anti-value	
Senior Management / Owners				
Employees				
Customers and Service Users				
Shareholders and Investors				
Suppliers and Partners				
Trades Unions				
Media Outlets				
Government and Regulators				
Local Communities				
Anti-Clients	SPECIAL TREATMENT REQUIRED			
Competitors				
Activist Groups				
Humanity				
The Planet				

STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

ENTERPRISE ECOSYSTEM

Please note that ecosystem value specification is a searching enquiry and not a form-filling exercise.

Ecosystem Value Specification devised by Jack Martin Leith | jackmartinleith.com

Creating the specification is a searching enquiry and not a form-filling exercise. The completed Ecosystem Value Specification forms part of the creative brief for the programme of work that is to be undertaken. We will return to this topic later.

What is greatness?

In the table below, I contrast the term ‘great’ with its counterpart, ‘mediocre’ (original meaning: [halfway up the mountain](#)).

Mediocre	Great
Unremarkable	Remarkable or outstanding in magnitude, degree, or extent ²
Insignificant; solves trivial human problems	Of outstanding significance or importance ² ; solves significant human problems
Good enough	Superior in quality ²
Self-serving	Noble ² (synonyms: benevolent, altruistic)

Note 2: Source is American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition.

In the enterprise realm, this translates into the set of attributes shown here:

The mediocre enterprise	The great enterprise
Looks after its own needs and interests	Contributes to the greater good
Employees' actions are informed by an enterprise-focused vision and strategy	Employees' actions are informed by a humanity-serving purpose and mission
Employees lack the capabilities demanded by the strategy	Employees possess the capabilities required for accomplishing the mission
Seeks to create value for customers and shareholders	Seeks to create value for all constituents of the enterprise ecosystem
Everything must be paid for	Some value generators are provided at zero cost
Satisfies functional needs of customers/users (enables 'jobs to be done')	Creates meaningful and joyous experiences (holidays, cinema visits and romantic dinners, for example, are not 'jobs to be done')
Leadership is limited to senior executives	Leadership is pervasive
Bureaucracy is present in great measure	Bureaucracy is absent
Oppressive ambiance	Vibrant ambiance
Employees are treated as instruments of management	Employees are recognised as autonomous creators
Conversations are mainly routine	Conversations are mainly generative
Work is soul destroying	Work is purposeful, meaningful, life affirming
Change work is slow and often ineffective; it evokes so-called resistance	Change work is quick and effective; it evokes a desire to collaborate
Weak ability to flourish in a VUCA world	Strong ability to flourish in a VUCA world
Stagnation eventually sets in	Undergoes constant renewal
Allows anti-value generation to persist	Seeks out and arrests the generation of anti-value
Fails to realise value creation potential	Realises value creation potential

Examples of greatness

Based on the attributes listed above, it's hard to identify enterprises that create greatness, particularly in the business arena. IBM, for example, is enriching the world with its focus on creating a "Smarter Planet". Can we call that 'greatness'? Perhaps. But is IBM giving anything away for free? I consider this to be one of the hallmarks of a great enterprise.

Here are some enterprises that have considerable merit:

Disney Provides memorable experiences.

Apple Groundbreaking design and a great user experience.

Cirque du Soleil Transformed people's experience of circus, on a global scale.

US Navy SEALs The best of the best.

Wikipedia It has its flaws, but how did we ever manage without it?

Glastonbury Festival Michael Eavis invented the festival experience as we know it.

Nowhere A small but influential innovation practice that towers above the big players.

BBC No other broadcasting company comes close.

In an enterprise, what is the rationale for creating greatness?

Proposition 7: Unless enterprises rise to the challenge of solving humanity's problems, humanity is at risk of extinction.

This is the business case:

- By enriching the entire ecosystem of which it is but one interdependent part, the enterprise strengthens its viability and makes its long-term future more secure.
- The best talent is attracted and retained.
- Employees' creative potential is released.
- People give of their best, because their work has meaning and purpose.
- The reputation of the enterprise is enhanced.
- A distinctive and respected corporate brand arises.
- Competitive advantage is boosted. In his book *What Matters Now*, [Gary Hamel](#) states "Mediocrity is a competitive liability."
- More value, in the form of revenue, cordial relationships, goodwill etc, is created for the enterprise as a natural consequence of enriching the entire ecosystem.
- Shareholder value increases.

Why is greatness so elusive, when there are extraordinary people such as these inventing new management theory and practice?

Juanita Brown and David Isaacs (World Café)

Gervase Bushe and Robert Marshak (Dialogic Organization Development)

Clayton Christensen (Disruptive Innovation)

David Cooperrider (Appreciative Inquiry)

Gerard Endenburg (Sociocracy)

Jon Husband (Wirearchy)

Barry Johnson (Polarity Management)

Jake Jacobs (Real Time Strategic Change)

Frederic Laloux (Teal Organizations)

Alex Osterwalder (Business Model Canvas)

Harrison Owen (Open Space Technology)

Brian Robertson (Holacracy)

Simon Robinson and Maria Moraes Robinson (Holonomics)

Otto Scharmer (Theory U / Presencing)

Tony Ulwick (Jobs-to-be-Done theory)

Stephen Vargo and Robert Lusch (Service-Dominant Logic)

Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff (Future Search)

James Wilk (Minimalist Intervention)

And why is greatness so elusive, despite more than 30 years of dedicated activism?

In the organisational realm there has been no shortage of movers and shakers during the past three decades, or collaborative gatherings in which such people created visions, shared ideas, and hatched plans. Here are some notable events:

1983: First International Symposium on Organization Transformation (OT1). The worldwide OT network spawned two books ([Transforming Work](#) and [Transforming Leadership](#)), the trailblazing consultancy [nowhere](#), and the practice of Open Space Technology. The final OT conference (OT24), held in Hawai'i, took place in 2006.

1987: From Organization to Organism conference, hosted by [Findhorn Foundation](#), UK.

1987: [World Business Academy](#) established.

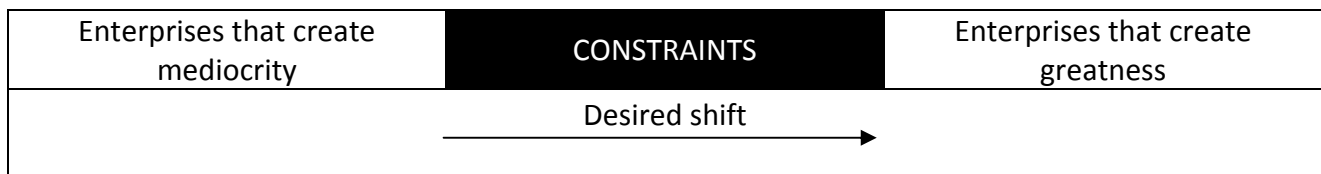
2007: Brian Robertson and Tom Thomison establish HolacracyOne. [Read about Holacracy on Wikipedia](#)

2008: Half Moon Bay conference, which gave rise to Gary Hamel's Harvard Business Review article [Moon Shots for Management](#) and the creation of [Management Innovation eXchange](#).

2014: Publication of [Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness](#) by Frederic Laloux.

So why does greatness continue to be elusive?

Proposition 8: A set of powerful constraints inhibits the shift from mediocrity to greatness.



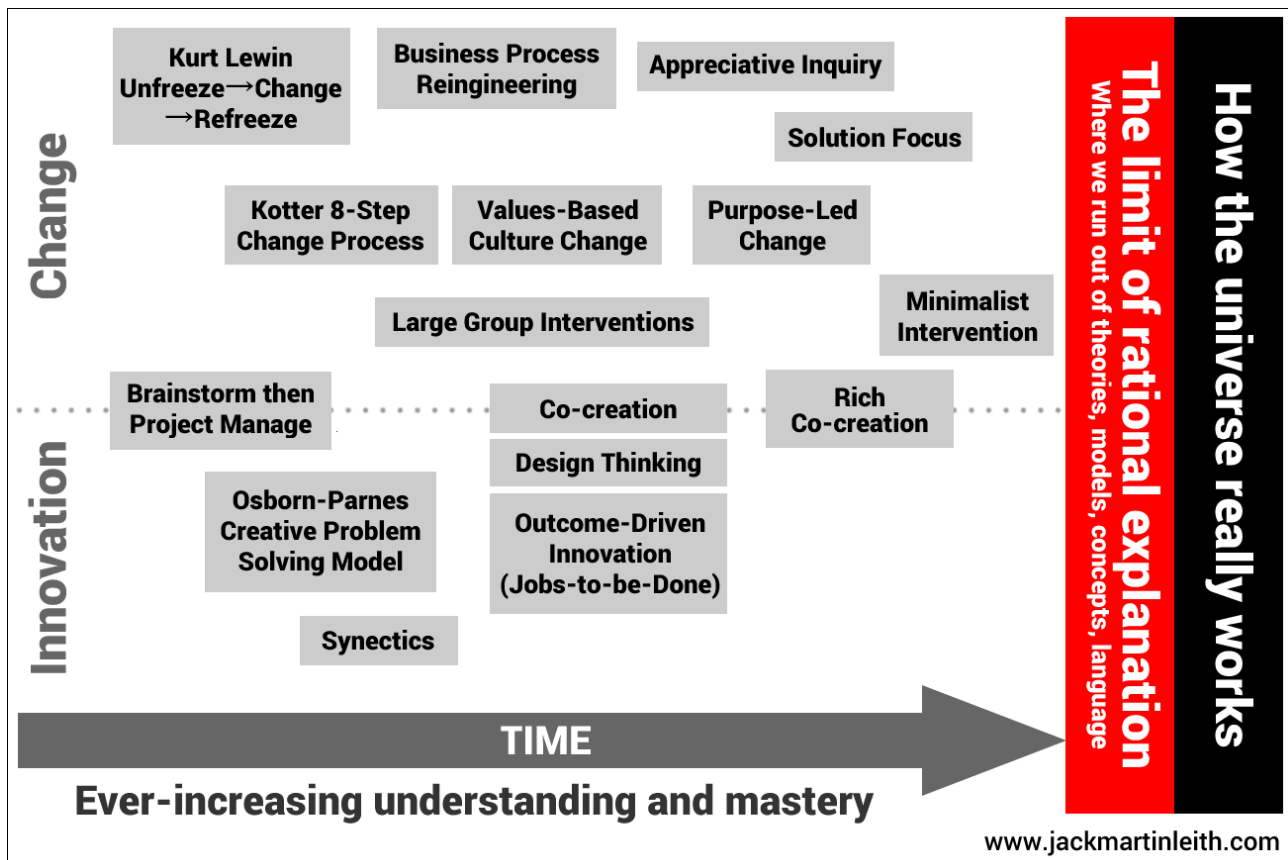
This set of constraints includes:

- Obsolete worldviews.
- Fallacious theories, concepts and models.
- Erroneous beliefs.
- Flawed metaphors.
- Restrictive rules.
- Behavioural norms.
- Custom and practice.

These and other constraints, which collectively I call the 'D-field' (D = degenerative), act as a barrier between how we *think* the universe works—for example, how the new comes into being, and how this changes into that—and how the universe *really* works.

Evolution of approaches and methodologies

The following graphic shows how innovation and change methodologies have evolved. We will never be able to fully explain how the new comes into being, and how this changes into that. But as our understanding increases, so our innovation and change work becomes more effective.



“The problems in the world stem from the difference between how we think and how the world works.” – [Gregory Bateson](#)

“There seems to be an endless stream of thought leaders and consultants who claim to have engineered a more “scientific” approach to business. Yet they, just like the positivists, always seem to fall short. Unfortunately, the real world defies logic.” – Greg Satell, [Why Business Defies Logic](#)

Some erroneous beliefs and flawed metaphors that inhibit the shift from mediocrity to greatness

1. Resistance to change is a fact of life. Not true. The concept of resistance to change in the organisational realm was conceived by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s and subsequently misinterpreted. People are not “resisting change”. They are expressing their displeasure that the strategy, change initiative or innovation endeavour is designed in such a way that it generates anti-value for them. In these circumstances, the anti-value that people experience arises from a loss—usually of status, rewards or personal capability.

“This article examines the origins of one of the most widely accepted mental models that drives organizational behavior: The idea that there is resistance to change and that managers must overcome it. This mental model, held by employees at all levels, interferes with successful change implementation. The authors trace the emergence of the term resistance to change and show how it became received truth. Kurt Lewin introduced the term as a systems concept, as a

force affecting managers and employees equally. Because the terminology, but not the context, was carried forward, later uses increasingly cast the problem as a psychological concept, personalizing the issue as employees versus managers. Acceptance of this model confuses an understanding of change dynamics. Letting go of the term — and the model it has come to embody — will make way for more useful models of change dynamics.”

Source: [Challenging ‘Resistance to Change’](#), by Eric B. Dent and Susan Galloway Goldberg, The George Washington University, in Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, Vol. 35 No. 1, March 1999 25-41.

2. Change is a journey from the current state of affairs to the desired state. No, it’s not. There is no ‘here’, no ‘there’, and no ‘journey’. This is simply a metaphor—one that limits our ability to bring our desired present (not desired future) into being quickly, easily and with certainty.



3. To produce a good idea you must first generate a lot of ideas. This may be true if you rely solely on synthetic imagination. However, people who are open to creative imagination produce and develop just one idea: one that will ultimately enrich the world. I will say more about synthetic imagination and creative imagination in a moment.

4. Management must engage employees. Given that engagement programmes continue to be spectacularly ineffective (according to Gallup, only 13% of employees worldwide are engaged at work), why don't enterprises simply abolish them?

The answer is, in part, because so many people—such as organisation development consultants, survey firms and software vendors—have too much invested in the engagement paradigm. When the efficacy of employee engagement work is challenged, they answer: “If it’s not working, it’s because you’re doing it wrong.”

Trying to engage a person is like trying to dance them. It cannot be done. The engagement model is fundamentally flawed. It will never work. Gary Hamel puts his finger on it in this excerpt from his book [The Future of Management](#):

“If there was a single question that obsessed 20th century managers, from Frederick Taylor to Jack Welch, it was this: How do we get more out of our people? At one level, this question is innocuous—who can object to the goal of raising human productivity? Yet it’s also loaded with industrial age thinking: How do we (meaning ‘management’) get more (meaning units of production per hour) out of our people (meaning the individuals who are obliged to follow our orders)? Ironically, the management model encapsulated in this question virtually guarantees that a company will never get the best out of its people. Vassals and conscripts may work hard, but they don’t work willingly.”

5. All creativity is combinatorial.

Proposition 9: Truly original ideas having the potential to enrich the world come to us by means of creative imagination, and not through synthetic imagination, which produces derivative ideas and mediocrity.

The process of combining existing ideas to create a new one is a product of synthetic imagination. This is described by Napoleon Hill in his classic book, [Think and Grow Rich](#) (pdf of entire book), and contrasted with creative imagination:

“Through the faculty of **synthetic imagination**, one may arrange old concepts, ideas, or plans into new combinations. This faculty creates nothing. It merely works with the material of experience, education, and observation with which it is fed. It is the faculty used most by the inventor, with the exception of he who draws upon the creative imagination, when he cannot solve his problem through synthetic imagination.

Through the faculty of **creative imagination**, the finite mind of man has direct communication with Infinite Intelligence. It is the faculty through which ‘hunches’ and ‘inspirations’ are received. It is by this faculty that all basic, or new ideas are handed over to man.”

I collect quotes from people who have experienced the power of creative imagination at work. Here are some of them:

David Arnold is a British film composer best known for scoring five James Bond films, the 1994 film *Stargate*, the 1996 film *Independence Day*, and the cult television series *Little Britain*, and who was appointed Musical Director for the 2012 Olympic Games and the 2012 Paralympic Games in London. During an appearance on the BBC Breakfast show, he was asked how he goes about composing music. He replied “You walk around with your aerials out and it gets delivered to you. It’s more about feeling it than thinking about it.”

Marianne Elliott-Said (Poly Styrene) said “I just channel my songs like a medium.”
Source: The Guardian, 27 April 2011.

Ian Rankin said “I’m not really in control at all of what I’m writing. It’s almost as though before I start writing there’s a shape sitting there that I’ve not seen yet, and when I start to write the novel the shape will reveal itself to me, the novel will decide which way it wants to go.” Source: The Guardian, 26 March 2011.

Lionel Richie was asked “Where do your melodies come from?” He replied: “I wish I knew. It’s like radio stations playing in my head. I’m in the shower singing along to this great song, and then I stop one moment and go, ‘Hey, it’s not on the radio.’ What’s frightening about it

is I'm not singing a song, I'm singing along with the song that's playing in my head."

Source: Deseret News, 31 January 1993.

Bryan Ferry was asked by the singer and radio presenter Cerys Matthews about his approach to songwriting. He said "When you get it right, it's like someone is writing it for you." Source: BBC Radio 6 Music, 30 December 2012.

Worldviews: mechanistic thinking, systems thinking and beyond

A worldview is an individual's set of fundamental beliefs and organising principles; his or her unquestioned assumptions about the nature of reality and the human place in it. A worldview is like the operating system in a computer, controlling operations behind the scenes but mostly outside the user's awareness. When someone upgrades his or her worldview, certain things that were previously impossible become possible, and some things that were difficult become easy.

This is how worldviews have evolved in the western world during the past 2,000 years:

Aristotelian-Ptolemaic	Newtonian-Cartesian	Pre-systemic	Systemic	Post-systemic
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Newtonian-Cartesian worldview

The Newtonian-Cartesian worldview is a system of thought based on the work of British physicist Isaac Newton (1642 - 1727) and the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596 - 1650). Newton described a mechanistic universe that is stable and predictable, and that obeys the law of cause and effect. Descartes formulated a concept of the absolute dualism between mind and matter, resulting in a belief that the material world can be described objectively, without reference to the human being.

This was the prevailing worldview throughout the 20th century, and it continues to *have a big impact* on the way we think, speak and act.

Pre-systemic worldview

People with a pre-systemic worldview have embraced some aspects of the systemic worldview, but their Newtonian-Cartesian worldview still runs the show.

Some people operating under a pre-systemic worldview cannot entertain the possibility of constructing their reality differently. Some condemn evolutionary models such as the one I presented earlier, believing them to be anti-egalitarian.

Others mistakenly believe they have upgraded to a systemic worldview already. In his book *Feeling and Personhood—Psychology in Another Key*, [John Heron](#), a prominent figure in the field of humanistic psychology, wrote:

"By the end of the seventeenth century a significant minority were already well established in the Newtonian-Cartesian belief system in the world of essence; but in the world of appearance most ordinary people were almost certainly still seeing the High Street, the sun, moon and stars in terms of the Aristotelio-medieval world-view.

In the same way, today [1992], a significant minority have abandoned the Newtonian-Cartesian belief system in favour of some elaboration of systems theory world-view. But it may be that they, and certainly the majority of people, still see the world in Newtonian-Cartesian terms.

It is a big shift for concepts to move from being simply beliefs held in the mind to beliefs that inform and transform the very act of perception."

In the organisational realm, the pre-systemic worldview is the prevailing operating system. It gives rise to such concepts as customer focus, employee engagement, triple bottom line, sustainability, teamwork, corporate culture, and values-based culture change.

Systemic worldview

What is a systemic worldview?

This definition, from [National Academy of Public Administration](#) in Washington, DC, is the best I can find:

“A systemic worldview is a system of thought that considers all the factors and elements involved, including how they relate to each other, how they work together as a whole, what the system needs in order to survive, thrive, and evolve in its environment, and how the system impacts [sic] and interacts with its surrounding environment, including how the system will be able to respond and evolve as needs and the surrounding environment change.”

Those who have upgraded to a systemic worldview are not just systems thinkers. They are systems actors.

Many varieties of systems thinking exist. Each is based on a different set of assumptions, and there is not much common ground. The main ones are listed below.

- General systems theory (Ludwig von Bertalanffy)
- Cybernetics—first and second order (Norbert Wiener, Ross Ashby, Gregory Bateson, Francisco Varela, Humberto Maturana)
- Management cybernetics—Viable System Model (Stafford Beer)
- Soft systems methodology (Peter Checkland)
- System dynamics (Jay Forrester)
- Complex systems (Santa Fe Institute, Ralph Stacey et al)

Post-systemic worldview

Proposition 10: Greatness arises from the realm beyond systems thinking.

A post-systemic worldview takes us much closer to the way the universe (not just the world) really works. Thinking and acting with a post-systemic worldview enables us to create the new, and change this into that, in a way that transcends theories, models and methods. This worldview emphasises acting in harmony with the natural way of things.

THE MATERIAL WORLD

It is dualistic. Some dualities:

Male	Female
Positive current	Negative current
North	South
Self	Other
In here	Out there
Good	Evil
Freedom	Constraint
Existence	Non-existence
Material world	Non-material world

THE NON-MATERIAL WORLD

Given the dualistic nature of the material world, the non-material world must also be part of reality.

It transcends duality and lies beyond worldviews, beliefs, theories, models, concepts, abstractions, metaphors, language and logic.

The non-material world cannot be described, explained or proven to exist. It can be known only through experience.

People with a post-systemic worldview take everything into account, including the ‘bad’ stuff, and including that which emanates from beyond the physical realm. Ever open to the new, they take nothing at face value, treat all knowledge as provisional, and trust their own experience over other people’s theories.

“Science needs to free itself from materialist dogma; indeed, science misunderstands nature by being wedded to purely materialist explanations.” —Rupert Sheldrake, *The Best Schools* ([view source](#)).

We will remain in the realm beyond systems thinking for the rest of this article.

Procreation

Proposition 11: In the realm beyond systems thinking, the process of bringing the new into being mimics human procreation

The process of human reproduction and development does not happen in stages. It is continuous. But because it is almost impossible to describe a continuous process, let’s imagine we’re writing a ‘having a baby’ book that’s divided into seven chapters: Preparation, Conception, Commitment, Gestation, Birth, Nurturing, and Realising Potential.

Readiness Are you ready to have a baby? Why do you want to have a baby? Is this the right time to be having a baby? What challenges will you face? How can you create the right conditions for conception to occur? When is the best time to conceive?

Conception One way or another, a sperm fertilises an ovum and conception occurs.

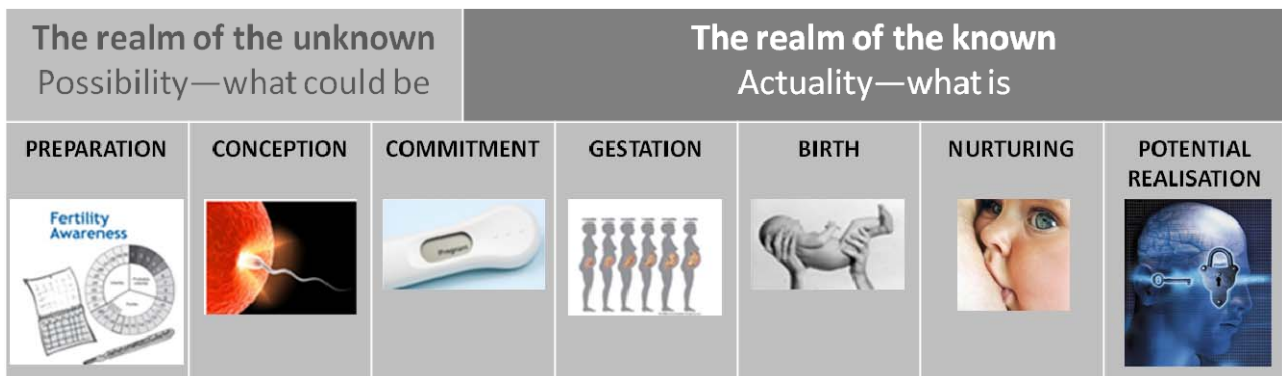
Commitment “Congratulations, you are pregnant.” This news forces a decision (commit or terminate?) and marks a transition from the realm of the unknown to the realm of the known.

Gestation Over a nine-month period, the zygote (fertilised ovum) becomes an embryo, which develops into a foetus.

Birth The baby is delivered (‘deliver’ being the correct verb for once) and takes its first breath. The umbilical cord is cut. Mother and baby are now separate entities.

Nurturing The parents care for the baby, providing sustenance, protection and love.

Potential realisation The parents help their offspring become all that he or she can be.



Translating the procreation metaphor into innovation and change work

Let’s now see how the procreation metaphor translates into innovation work (bringing the new into being) and change work (replacing the current state of affairs with the desired state).

Both types of work can be regarded as acts of creation: bringing forth a new value generator or a new organisational reality, where none existed before.

Readiness

Proposition 12: Readiness work activates the power of creative imagination.

The project team, composed of all those whose contribution, co-operation and consent are vital to the successful completion of the project, gets ready for the work that lies ahead.

The team’s first task is to understand the creative brief. If this not been provided, the project team will need to produce it themselves.

Creative brief

Purpose What is the purpose of this innovation or change project? Why is the new product, service, facility, establishment, event, or state of affairs required? How does this contribute to the enterprise’s overall purpose?

Context What is providing the impetus for this project? What is the background story?

Requirements What specific results or outcomes are required? What value must be created for each ecosystem constituent? What existing value must be preserved? What anti-value generation must be arrested?

Constraints These are the non-negotiables, the ‘musts’ and ‘must-nots’. Completion date and budget are included here.

Once the project team has got to grips with the creative brief, it carries out further activities that contribute to the required state of readiness, including those summarised below.

Expose phantom constraints These seem to be real, but vanish the moment you turn the light on. A common type of phantom constraint is what Gary Hamel calls ‘orthodoxies’: the norms, conventions, false assumptions, cherished beliefs, unwritten rules and sacred cows that influence behaviour in an enterprise, industry or sector.

Create an inventory of assets The team creates an inventory of tangible and intangible assets, including core competencies, that might be leveraged in order to create the specified value generator (for innovation projects) or the desired state of affairs (for change projects).

Explore the wider context The team explores external factors that might have a bearing on the innovation or change project, perhaps using a framework such as STEEP (Social, Technological, Environmental, Economic, Political factors). Discontinuities will be of particular interest when an innovation project is called for. A discontinuity is a convergence of events or trends that substantially changes the structure of an industry and the rules of the game.

Vision of realised potential The team envisions a new reality in which the required value is now present. The vision is outward-facing: its focus is the world, not the enterprise. It takes the form of a picture with explanatory text. It depicts a desired present, not a desired future. And it reflects a selfless service disposition.

The vision of realised potential forms a bridge from the readiness work to the conception of an idea that will form the core of the required value generator (reminder: product, service, facility, establishment or event) or change intervention.

Now that the team is fully immersed in the demands of the project, it is primed for the moment of conception.

Conception

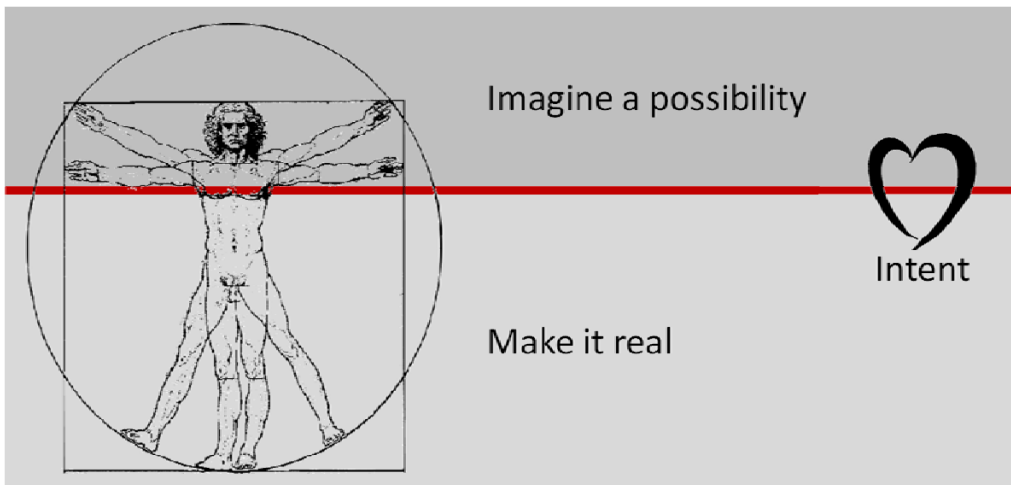
The readiness work, and the vision of realised potential in particular, engenders a state of awareness that enables team members to shut out interference from ‘the field’ and open themselves to creative imagination.

Although I have been a vocal advocate of co-creation for more than two decades, I want to emphasise that **an idea is conceived in the mind of one person**. This is not a proposition—it’s how the creative process works. Other team members will develop the idea throughout the gestation period, but conception is a solo activity.

Nevertheless, there are striking similarities between the conception of a fruitful idea and the conception that takes place in the womb:

- A **possibility** exists for enriching the world in a certain way. (This corresponds with the ovum.)
- Creative power—what Napoleon Hill calls **creative imagination**—is readily accessible. (This corresponds with the sperm.)
- The **union of possibility and creative imagination** brings forth a concept having the power to enrich the world. (This corresponds with the act of fertilisation and the formation of a zygote.)

Proposition 13: The human is a 'rig' for creating the new.



The part of ourselves situated above the heart is concerned with imagining possibilities for world enrichment. The part located below the heart is concerned with transforming possibilities into reality through unconditional service. When intent, our heart's desire, resonates with humanity's unmet needs, the two parts unite to form a *rig* ("apparatus designed for some purpose") that enables us to imagine what could be, ground the idea in the physical world, and bring it to life.

Commitment

Proposition 14: Commitment is an act of faith.

This is a crucial decision point. Is each team member prepared to do whatever it takes to carry the concept through the process of gestation and bring it into the physical world? Is everyone ready to say "Yes" and proceed in faith, despite the ocean of uncertainty that lies before them?

"Faith is a critical but curious mind's readiness to adopt a reality model (even if provisionally) for which there is less than absolute, empirical proof." — Jay Gaskill, [The Dialogic Imperative](#) (pdf).

Without the wholehearted commitment of team members and the project's sponsor, the project is dead in the water.

Gestation

Proposition 15: Downstream work requires an unconditional service disposition.

Once commitment has been made, the developmental process of gestation begins.

The team makes a rough drawing, three dimensional model, role-play, simulation, storyboard or other artefact. The purpose of this '[pretotype](#)' is to bring the concept into the physical world, even if in a very crude form. This is an essential part of the manifestation process. The concept can now be shared with others, both inside and outside the enterprise. Their ongoing feedback will enable the team to enhance and refine the embryonic entity as it *progresses through* a series of iterations. (Sometimes the 'change is a journey' metaphor is unavoidable.)

In an enterprise, the counterpart of unconditional love is unconditional service. Unconditional service is selfless action taken by an individual or group on behalf of others, motivated by a heartfelt desire to enrich the world.

Throughout the gestation period, the project team loves the embryonic creation like a mother loves her unborn child, providing essential nourishment and protection, and acting as its voice.

Birth

For the parents, the birth of a baby is a joyous and meaningful event, but it can also be painful, messy and fraught with danger.

The launch a value generator or the deployment of a change intervention is no different. Towards the end of the gestation period the project team must make preparations for the birth, be ready for all eventualities and leave nothing to chance.

Nurturing

This element is missing from many innovation processes, particularly in the field of product innovation, where the marketing function generally takes responsibility for the launch of the product and the subsequent promotional work aimed at unlocking its value-creating potential.

Nurturing is “the action of raising or caring for offspring”³. The verb ‘to nurture’ means “to feed and protect or support and encourage”⁴.

Sources: 3. American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition. 4. Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary.

In the weeks and months following the launch, two members of the project team act as ‘godparents’ or ‘guardian angels’, working alongside the marketing people (whose focus is elsewhere) to feed, protect and support the new creation until it is ready to stand on its own two feet.

Potential realisation

This final phase of the project is aimed at unlocking the value-generating potential of the new creation. Those responsible for this work revisit the Ecosystem Value Specification and seek to create maximum experienced value for each constituent of the enterprise ecosystem, using every means at their disposal.

Enterprises wishing to create greatness will need to create a new function that cuts across or brings together such disciplines as marketing, customer service, supply chain management, media relations, investor relations, and community outreach.

Without this new function, realising the value-creating potential of the product, service, facility, establishment or event may prove to be an insurmountable challenge.

Conclusion and thanks

In this article—a labour of love—I have presented 15 propositions for creating greatness in the realm beyond systems thinking:

1. We are here to enrich the world.
2. An enterprise exists to enrich the world.
3. There are three main types of value: economic, abstract, and experienced.
4. The converse of value is anti-value.
5. Value is co-created through the interaction between the value beneficiary (e.g. consumer) and the value generator (product, service, facility, establishment or event).
6. Greatness-creating enterprises seek to generate maximum value for each member of the enterprise ecosystem—not just favoured stakeholders such as customers and investors.

7. Unless enterprises rise to the challenge of solving humanity's problems, humanity is at risk of extinction.
8. A set of powerful constraints inhibits the shift from mediocrity to greatness.
9. Truly original ideas having the potential to enrich the world come to us by means of creative imagination, and not through synthetic imagination, which produces derivative ideas and mediocrity.
10. Greatness arises from the realm beyond systems thinking.
11. In the realm beyond systems thinking, the process of bringing the new into being mimics human procreation.
12. Readiness work activates the power of creative imagination.
13. The human is a 'rig' for creating the new.
14. Commitment is an act of faith.
15. Downstream work requires an unconditional service disposition.

These propositions are the fruits of a lifetime of study, experimentation and real-world application. I hope you have found them of value, and thank you for your patience, tenacity and fortitude as you complete your *voyage* through this unavoidably lengthy article.

My special thanks go to the co-convenors of European Sharing on Systems Thinking, Peter Lauritzen and Klára Lauritzenová, for giving me the opportunity to share these ideas, some of which are seeing the light of day for the first time.

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8 June 2015

Updated 14 August 2017

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Running a workshop at European Sharing on Systems Thinking, Prague, Czech Republic, June 2015

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