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Issues In Organizations That Lend Themselves To A Playback Approach

By Sarah Halley

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By: Sarah Halley   Leadership essay   July 1997

"We, all of us, are being called on to do something unprecedented. We are being called to think about 'everything that is,' for we now know that everything is interrelated and that the well-being of each is connected to the well-being of the whole."

- Sallie McFague

Introduction

In Oct. of 1996 1 had the opportunity to attend and present at the National Organizational Development Network's Annual Conference in Orlando, Fla. I was there with two colleagues to present the uses of interactive theater, including Playback techniques, in training and organizational development (OD). What we found was an enormous amount of excitement and support for what we were doing. Role plays are the extent to which most trainers and consultants feel competent utilizing theater techniques. During our presentation they experienced the power of mobilizing a group in action to Learn -and -communicate ideas and their hunger for techniques -other than role plays became quite evident. I was also thrilled to discover that about a quarter of the books for sale had to do with the importance of soul, spirit, and creativity in the workplace, validating that a paradigm shift is indeed underway in the corporate sector. This paradigm shift is responsible for what I believe are many opportunities to use Playback Theatre in organizations to accomplish a variety of outcomes, and is the inspiration for this paper.

My intention in this paper is to provide some background information about the new paradigm in business that could be of use to the playback practitioner interested in working in organizations, and then to describe some current issues in organizations today that lend themselves to a Playback approach. First I will look at what Peter Senge calls a learning organization, which encompasses issues such as visioning, team building, and communication. I will then take an in depth look at the issue of diversity. Where applicable I will draw connections between current approaches and Playback in an attempt to show Playback's universality and uniqueness.

Background

Corporations are in a state of crisis. Loss of production jobs, downsizing, corporate mergers, international competition, environmental and human rights issues, and the end of the Cold War are straining the very fabric of the business sector, and major changes in both the hows and whys of doing business are in order. The new paradigm in business that is being called for by the World Business Academy is one in which "*all business forms empower human society and create a sustainable global economy*"'1. They claim that the seeds of a new way of doing business are already alive and well in the global market, and their hope is that by naming them and providing a forum for exchange, that they will strengthen, grow together, and become the norm by which business is thought of and carried out globally. I would like to present their mission and assumptions because they speak so well as a foundation for the need for Playback in the business world. The premise of the World Business Academy:

*"We believe that, of all social forms, only business has the power to facilitate the solutions to challenges with which we are now confronted. It is also our belief that the ability of business to resolve these perilous challenges translates into a responsibility for business people to act as trustees for human society."*2

They ascertain that the current, post WWII hierarchical model of the business enterprise is currently destroying the planet and that it would literally be suicidal to keep employing the same business model. In their words, *"Due to industrial and technological developments, we find food not fit to eat, water not fit to drink, air not fit to breathe, and, now, we can't even walk safely in the sunshine."'* 3 Business executives, who wield an enormous amount of power and energy globally must be responsible for creating a positive, sustainable future if they wish to survive. Their (and all of our) survival depends upon the effective use of resources for the benefit of all people being served by business, so that society can continue to flourish. What is important now is to focus on the future and the search for solutions instead of putting more resources into looking for people to blame. Many of these solutions already exist and are being utilized in the corporate sector, as I discovered for myself last fall in Orlando, and are well on the way to manifesting the vision of the World Business Institute, which is as follows:

"The raw resources of business await the hand of the sculptor to 'chip away' excess materialistic practices to enable the authentic spirit of business to emerge, the spirit of service that nurtures and empowers human society rather than enslaves it. Business leaders can replace simplistic goals, which are viewed as 'pragmatic,' with corporate and individual vision; rigidity with flexible business cultures; management hierarchies with individual empowerment; logic-driven analysis with a new blend of analysis and attuned intuition; competition with cooperation and

co-creation; aggressive values with harmony, trust, honesty, and compassion; and short-term focus with the 'seventh generation' test of America's Iroquois Indians. We as business leaders can rediscover the value of wholeness. We can learn to be guided by our inner wisdom. We can operate from a broad awareness of enlightened self-interest ... we are entering an era of reintegration of what we do in the marketplace with who we are as spiritually developing human beings. The human spirit is what remains when the excess is chipped away."[4]

The New Paradigm in Business

"The most visible differences between the corporation of the future and its present-day counterpart will not be the products they make or the equipment they use- but who will be working, why they will be working, and what work will mean to them." [5]

-Robert Haas, CEO of Levi Strauss and Company

To begin, I want to clarify what is meant by a paradigm. The New Webster's Dictionary defines a paradigm as a "pattern, example, or model." Due to scientific changes this century, the word paradigm has come to mean the fundamental assumptions about the nature of the world, and a paradigm shift occurs when the old set of assumptions no longer hold true and a new paradigm or set of assumptions is recognized and applied by everyone.

One way to describe the new paradigm in business is that *"it is doing business from our most profound inner awareness and in connection with the consciousness of others and the earth."*[6] This acknowledges we all have inner wisdom and creativity that is unique, connected, and essential to bring forward in our work lives. The key words or concepts of the new paradigm in business are connection, creativity, compassion, intuition, and it's important to note that changes in scientific development in this century have been a key catalyst for the changes in business we see today.

In the new science, a Newtonian focus on particles or things as the building blocks of matter has been replaced by a Quantum physics focus on energetic fields or relationships. Simple cause and effect has given way to interdependence and interconnection, where quantum leaps or shifts in energy states are not linear nor exactly predicable. Relying on intuition and inner knowledge is seen as a valid way of charting new directions and assessing how the world looks. In other words, "if we don't believe in something, it doesn't exist- no matter how much data is thrown in front of us."' Another way of illustrating this is the change from the everyday saying "I'll believe it when I see it" to "I'll see it when I believe it." Newton's second law of thermodynamics which states that everything is in a state of decay or entropy has been replaced by Prigogine's chaos theory, in which everything is in a process of creation and chaos or disorder is a necessary step on the way to higher levels of order. Biologists, ecologists, and chemists all agree that a connected, whole systems approach makes

more sense as they grapple with environmental problems or work with new materials formed by molecular connections previously unheard of.

In the old way of doing business, people are seen as replaceable parts, and orders are given from the top down, irregardless of who is receiving them. Decisions are made only after surveys and research has proven their accuracy, and rigid, clockwork-like management structures prevail. Feelings and intuition are seen at best as unreliable and inappropriate, and work relationships are a problematic necessity that are meant to be kept impersonal and professional. What people do on their own time is their own business, as long as it doesn't interfere with their performance at work. In some fields, continuing education is valued, but only if it directly relates to the job, i.e. professional development, with little to no value placed on personal development. Sayings like "It's a dog eat dog world" and "All's fair in love and war" and the values they imply are common underpinnings to corporate strategies, where the environment is viewed as inexhaustible and short-term profits rather that long-term consequences are what drive policies.

In the new paradigm of business, the overarching objectives are essentially *"the awakening and personal development of everyone associated with it and the corresponding service to the community."*7 There are indicating characteristics of a "new" business, such as the importance of vision and alignment of all employees with that vision, an emphasis on empowerment and values, the importance of purpose and meaning in the work being done, and a lack of hierarchy. There is not, however, a template of what a "new" business looks like. The new paradigm of business is more of a process that's in a constant state of development, and what works for one system may not work for another. The new corporation is committed to the process of reinventing the workplace as inevitable changes occur, and this re-visioning is considered an integral part of doing business. The efficiency of a system is judged with cooperation, community, and compassion in mind. Leadership is open and flexible and focuses more on employee empowerment than managerial direction, and value is placed on learning. Inner as well as outer growth is valued, as is seen in the importance of training and personal growth programs as well as the development of community service programs in which employees can use some of their work hours to do community outreach. Competition, cooperation, and co-creation are all valued ways of working together, both within the corporation and between companies. Essential values in the new corporation include openness, trust, integrity, compassion, mutual respect, harmony, and responsibility for outcomes.

In looking at how Playback can be of use in organizations, I am struck by the similarities between the new paradigm in business and the underpinnings of Playback. Playback depends on group process, tele or interconnectedness, spontaneity, and active listening through heart as well as head. It is community building, provides insight by seeing a situation differently, and validates creativity and intuition. It is, in essence, a whole systems approach. The next question I would like to explore is, "If Playback operates from the same paradigm as the new business, what does Playback offer that is

unique, and how does one go about designing and marketing Playback for business?" The following is advice from a Scandinavian business executive that I find particularly helpful as a starting point.

How to lead the change

The new way of thinking presents a tremendous challenge to business in the areas of personal development and human growth. The question remains, how to make the new thinking an integral part of business life.

"To my mind, we are facing one of the greatest pedagogical challenges ever. The new way of thinking will be regarded by many in the establishment as a threat to which they may respond with increased rigidity. My suggestion is, let them be. It is a waste of time and capacity to act as missionaries attempting to convince and convert. Better to find and join forces with those companies and individuals who are open to and longing for the new way. Encourage networks to be created amongst them and concentrate the efforts on these networks. These efforts may include seminars, articles, books, and so on. However, the new thought is sufficiently subtle and abstract that much of the 'work' and the communication will be simply being with one another."

- -Rolf V. Osterberg, from: *"A New Kind of Company with a New Kind of Thinking"* 8

The Learning Organization

The learning organization is an idea, a vision developed by Peter Senge, the Director of the Systems Thinking and Organizational Learning Program at the MIT Sloan School of Management.

It is an excellent model for Playback people to understand and utilize in thinking about the uses of Playback in organizations transitioning to or already operating out of the new paradigm in business. A basic definition of learning and the learning organization according to Senge is as follows:

"Most fundamentally, learning is about enhancing capacity. Learning is about creating and building the capacity to create that which you previously couldn't create. It is intimately related to action, which taking in information is not ... Real learning is always 'in the body'. So learning organizations are organizations that are continuously enhancing their capacity to create. This concept of the learning organization (echoes the idea) that groups of people can potentially operate in ways that are fundamentally more generative, empowering, and inspiring than the ways in which we normally operate."9

Senge goes on to describe a number of what he calls *"learning disabilities"* in organizations that mirror some of problems I have already presented about the current climate in many organizations today. He goes on to present five basic disciplines that learning organizations must be committed to. He uses the word discipline in the way it is used in the phrase *"artistic discipline"* or *"spiritual discipline,"* implying a set of practices based on a particular theory that one spends a lifetime attempting to master. I will briefly present each discipline and then suggest ways that Playback could be used as a practice towards mastery.

The first discipline is that of building shared vision. "*The discipline of building shared vision is centered around a never-ending process, whereby people in an organization articulate their common stories-around vision, purpose, values, why their work matters, and how it fits into the larger world.*"9 Shared vision includes not only vision, (a picture of where an organization wants to go and what it will be like when they arrive) but also values (the how), mission or purpose (the what), and concrete goals. At the heart of building shared vision are ongoing processes in which people at all levels of an organization can speak from the heart about what matters to them and be heard by senior management and each other. Senge goes on to say that before a group can work on a shared vision, each individual must have their own personal vision. By encouraging people to personally share their thoughts, feelings, stories, hopes, dreams, and experiences in a public forum that is honoring and respectful, Playback is a natural way to support the exploration of vision, both personal and shared.

The second discipline is personal mastery, a concept that Senge refers to as the most radical position advocated in his book. He states, "*Learning organizations must be fully committed to the development of each individual's personal mastery- each individual's capacity to create their life the way they truly want.*"11 In order for an individual to create the life they want, they need to be able to hold an accurate picture of their current reality alongside of their personal vision. This creates what Senge calls "*creative tension*", a force that can actually be used to propel an individual or organization toward their vision.

The third discipline is called mental models and is integrally linked with how we see our current reality. Mental models are the internal constructions and beliefs that we continuously use to perceive and interpret the world around us. They color every communication and yet they are obscured or ignored in most organizational settings. In order to recognize and communicate our mental models we need reflection and inquiry skills. We need the ability to ask tough questions that challenge established practices and policies. We need to be able to identify what our underlying assumptions are. A critical idea related to mental models is what Senge refers to as "*levels of abstraction.*"11 Our minds work so fast that we confuse what we are observing (data) with the images our minds form based on what we observe (abstractions), and we begin to treat the abstraction as if it were data. For example, someone talking loudly would be data while an abstraction would be that the person is insensitive. A challenge (for managers) is to

*"surface, expose, and bring into a conversation people's assumptions about the world so that shared mental models can continually improve".11*Another important challenge is for all of us to identify our mental models and the effect they have on our picture of current reality. Playback would be an interesting tool to explore for helping people to reflect on their current reality and identify some of their mental models. I know I have had the experience in Playback in which, by watching a story of mine enacted, I gained deep insight as to what my assumptions and beliefs were at the time of the story and how they colored my reality.

The fourth discipline is called team learning. Senge defines teams as *"the learning units of organizations"* or *"groups of people who need one another to act"*11. I liken what he describes as team learning to the sharing that happens at the end of a psychodrama or sociodrama, in which all group members are open to learning in a receptive, spontaneous state, so that one person's insight literally ripples through the group. This would be an example of a dialogue, or *"a conversation where the meaning moves the group"* and the group is *"sharing in a pool of collective meaning."*11 He contrasts this with a discussion, which comes from the same roots as percussion and concussion and literally means "to heave one's views at one another." 11 He insists that collective learning will rarely take place without the enrichment of dialogue, though there are times when discussions are important. Dialogue is also a technology that many organization consultants use to get groups talking. I participated in a dialogue session at the ODN conference in Fla. and I liken it to a timed Quaker meeting that focuses on a topic presented by a facilitator, with a few basic ground rules such as agreement of all participants to suspend assumptions, to treat each other with respect, and to speak to the center of the room instead of to each other. The facilitator begins and ends the session, and is a participant in the middle, sharing from her or his own personal experience, and occasionally jumping in as facilitator. The following list of questions are, for the facilitator of a dialogue session and are presented here because, as well as shedding light on some of the goals of a dialogue session, I think they pertain to a number of roles in Playback, especially conductor and leader.

-How am I hearing what is being said here?

-Who am I as I listen here?

-What am I in this scene?

-Where am I listening from in myself?   Am I 'them'?   Am I the silence?   Am I my ideas? Am I my disturbances?

-Where are the fragments that might stretch or fragment the container?

-Who's going to want to applause?

-Who's going to want to be constantly adjusting and improving the process?

-Who's going to want to fight with the leader?

-Who's going to want to raise objections to the process?

I see a number of applications for Playback in team learning and mental models. First of all, the kind of listening and presenting what we have heard that we do in Playback would be very useful in helping people and groups assess their current reality. Performances and workshops could focus on assessing where a group is and where they would like to go. As a part of this process, Playback could help individuals vision what they want and also help bring conscious awareness to their mental models and underlying assumptions about themselves and the world around them. I also think Playback could be used in conjunction with dialogue and would be especially useful in engaging experiential learners who tend to drift off if there is too much talking without any movement. Playback workshops, in which participants are doing Playback and other improv exercises, would help teams develop better listening skills, help them work spontaneously together, and help them access the wisdom and intuition that come through the body.

The fifth discipline is systems thinking. It operates as an underlying philosophy that breathes depth and life into all the other disciplines, transforming them from a list of ideas and techniques to be applied, to a practice to be lived. Senge holds that the best definition of systems thinking is "*understanding how our actions shape our reality.*"12 It gives us confidence that we can create a different reality in the future and empowers us to create new visions, individually and collectively. It provides tools that help us to become conscious of hidden assumptions, helps us to see the importance of inter-relationships, helps us to create more constructive mental models. It is also essential for understanding team learning and fostering collaborative inquiry.

So what are these tools? One simple one is what former CEO of Xerox Canada calls "peripheral vision, or the ability to pay attention to the world as if through a wide-angle, not a telephoto lens, so you can see how your actions interrelate with other areas of activity." 13 Systems thinking is based observing and recognizing patterns that are casual but not simply linear: A causes B and B causes C while both A and B continuously relate with both C and D, so that various elements in a system feed information and influence to each other over time and changing one element has many outcomes depending on the interrelationships.

The are no simple rules in systems thinking, but instead there are ways of thinking. The best starting point is to look for underlying structures rather than events, and to think in terms of relationships, or more accurately inter-relationships. Senge provides what he calls the laws of the" fifth discipline"14, which are systematic ways of thinking. They are as follows:

(1) *Today's problems come from yesterday's 'solutions.'*
(2) *The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back.*
(3) *Behavior grows better before it grows worse. And sometimes it grows worse before it grows better.*
(4) *The easy way out usually leads back in.*
(5) *The cure can be worse than the disease.*

(6)   *Faster is slower. (The optimal rate of growth is not the fastest possible rate).*
(7)   *Cause and effect are not closely related in time and space.*
(8)   *Small changes can produce big results- but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious.*
(9)   *You can have your cake and eat it too- but not all at once.*
(10) *Dividing an elephant in half does not produce two small elephants.*
(11) *There is no blame.*   15

Again, I think that what Playback has to offer organizations in the area of systems thinking is the ability to listen to the details of a story while being open to the essence of the story at the same time. We think and act in a systems way, and can therefore be a powerful mirror for organizations that are committed to systems thinking. We also embody the kind of compassion that is grounded in a level of awareness and is essential for making the shift to systems thinking. As Senge puts it, *"The discipline of seeing interrelationships gradually undermines older attitudes of blame and guilt. We begin to see that all of us are trapped in structures, structures embedded both in our ways of thinking and in the interpersonal and social milieus in which we live ... In my experience, as people see more of the systems within which they operate, and as they understand more clearly the pressures influencing one another, they naturally develop more compassion and empathy."*16

Diversity

Before embarking on a discussion about diversity and what Playback has to offer business in working with diversity issues, I want to begin by clarifying what is meant by the term diversity, or cultural diversity. The dictionary simply defines diversity as "variety" or the "quality, state, fact, or instance of being diverse; different. The following quotes 'expand on diversity as difference and weave in a working definition of culture, which relates to Peter Senge's idea of "mental models" and their influence on how we perceive others and the world around us.

*"Diversity is an attempt to set a climate in which the organization welcomes different people and supports an awareness that different people bring positive contributions to the organization. Multicultural workforces are inevitable. The organizations and companies that build on the strengths that differences bring will be competitive and survive in the 21st century. Learning to manage diversity is simply good management."*17

-Winnie Lanoix, Ed.D

Ethnicity, race, gender, and socioeconomic status along with the influences of family, religion, age, sexual orientation, physical attributes, geographical, political and occupational experiences form our respective cultural foundations.

Culture provides our identity, our sense of stability and clarity, and our view of ourselves and our place in the world within a set of boundaries. It has provided our

bases of power and our sources of strength to survive. When this strength is used repressively against others, abuses and inequities of power cause our conflicts. We all suffer alienation from our common humanity and spiritual purpose.

"Today's world demands that we expand our cultural boundaries and create a new sense of identity and power which embraces differences. Transformations of ourselves and our world through multicultural respect for and inclusion of diversity in our institutions and our daily lives is imperative. Time is short. We must heal our spirits, stop denying our destructiveness, and realize our inter-dependence so we can live to thrive in a cooperative co-existence."18

- -Chery Avery Owen, Director, Multicultural Training and Research Institute, Temple University

Diversity and Playback

Playback honors and respects all life, values intuition, and depends on the inherent interconnectedness of life that indigenous people refer to as the web of life. This makes it a powerful tool for working with diversity issues. As Playback practitioners, to make a difference in diversity work we need to define what diversity work means to us. At the conference in Perth, a white man told his story about being picked on because of the color of his skin, and my understanding was that the story was met with mixed reviews. Many thought it was inappropriate, or it made them uncomfortable. Are all stories, all experiences worthy of unconditional respect? In my experience with diversity work, this kind of story is quite common. Every human being has some story of being mistreated, including white people. White people often want to express this because they feel bad and they don't want to be seen as only oppressors and not because they aren't aware of racism. They are. Most white people carry around more guilt than they know what to do with and a good dose of hopelessness, along with their share of internalized racism.

This kind of dynamic is also seen in gender work, where men are often seen only as oppressors and women only as victims. This is a tough dynamic to change, and is also inaccurate. The system we live in is oppressive and all people suffer in it, though they suffer in different ways. To stay with gender for a moment, men are socialized to behave in certain ways; taught to want some things and not others; taught that some feelings are ok and some are not They pay a price for the privilege they receive, whether they are consciously aware of it or not. They live with a nagging feeling that whatever woman they are with is not attractive enough and so they often let go of the possibility of a deep connection to chase what they have been taught to believe is the object of their desire, or they become addicted to sex clubs or pornography. They lock away feelings that, if expressed, would make them appear weak. They march off to war because it is the manly thing to do, and they sacrifice relationships with their children by working long hours away from home to be good providers. They don't dare share the emptiness

they feel with other men and instead remain isolated and alone. Many also live with bottled up anger that is akin to a monster inside, which can surface in destructive ways, only to be numbed through alcohol, drug, or work addictions. I have met many men who consider themselves to be feminists, and few who feel comfortable looking at their own pain. It appears to be more comfortable to view women as victims who need their support, more comfortable to feel guilty for being a man and therefore somehow responsible. There is a kind of strength in that. As a woman. I find it incredibly empowering to see the ways in which men are also victims. When I can hold the perspective that they are and always were doing the best that they could, and it is the system and not them that is bad, then I am better able to hear their pain instead of just demanding that they hear mine. We are all in pain. No one wins in an oppressive society. Even the rich have to wall themselves up in isolation to "protect" what they have, denying themselves a place in the circle of all life.

To go back to the conference in Perth, the story of a white man being discriminated in itself was not the problem. It was an opening to a conversation about how we are all hurt by racism. The anger that was directed at him as a young boy is the same anger that perpetuates what is known as black on black violence, or white on black violence. As a Playback community, do we have the courage to bear all the stories? Do we have the courage to love all the perpetrators as well as all the victims? Do we have the wisdom and compassion to separate the actor from the actions? How inclusive do we really want to be as a community? My hope is that we as a community do possess the courage to hear all the stories, and that by doing so, we will become a valuable resource for the world. Until then, we will do as much healing in the world as we manage to accomplish ourselves and no more. My vision for the use of Playback in diversity is that we "go there", that we do the work ourselves and share it with the world. I see this as an ongoing process in which we go in and do the work in our companies and as a larger community, then we work in the world, then come back together again to work some more, and so on, in an ever-expanding spiral of respect for all our relations. This is more that my vision. It is also my prayer.

Assuming that we as individuals and as a community are actively working on our own diversity issues, what does Playback then have to offer organizations in doing diversity work and what would it look like? It certainly would not be another version of Diversity 101, or the half day or day long sensitivity trainings that some companies currently use as a band aid for their growing diversity problems. To refer again to Prigogine, what companies may see as growing diversity problems are not really an actual increase in problems. Through the eyes of Prigogine, the growing chaos and breakdown of current social structures are a necessary step on the way to a new, and better social system. We can, by valuing diversity and respecting differences, help that shift move towards a more harmonious state, even if we can't say when it will occur or exactly what it will look like. Do we believe that people can live in peace and mutual respect? That is the question to ask, and I believe the answer is yes. If enough of us believe this, we can energetically help a planetary quantum leap to occur.

So, what does Playback have to contribute to this shift? We model interconnectedness, teamwork in which all members have a unique and important contribution to make, and respect. We give groups the chance to witness each others stories in an inclusive environment. We can and should ask inclusive questions, invite diverse stories to emerge, and model acceptance and non judgment of all stories. If we can keep in mind that people are good and they do hurtful things because they either don't know better or they are trying to alleviate their pain in some way, than we can find ways to frame even the most difficult stories so that light is shed on some aspect. We must invite all stories and receive them without judgment, especially in doing diversity work. I'll give an example from my own life that illustrates the importance of listening without judgment.

I attended a Playback performance this past year in which I chose to tell a story. The story was about a difficult moment that my husband Eric and I had on our honeymoon. We were camping and it was very hot. I was in one of my favorite places in Utah and I wanted to share it with him but it was too hot and he, not a camper, was miserable. I told the story without a conscious awareness about how disappointed I was, and instead I put Eric down quite harshly. The conductor was uncomfortable with the telling and did something that to me felt like I was being shamed. She said something like, "are you sure you want to tell this in front of all these people?" At that moment I was sure I didn't, because of the way I was (or wasn't) received. The actors in the enactment brought out my disappointment and I left the chair with a deeper understanding of what had happened that night in Utah and greater compassion for Eric. I also left feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed. Because I was with my Playback company and we were to meet and rehearse with the performing company the next day, I had the opportunity to process what happened with the conductor. She said she felt I was bashing Eric and she was concerned that I was doing damage to my marriage. It occurred to me that Eric and I have a relationship that might be unconventional by her standards, as I checked with Eric after the show and he was not put off by the telling (he understood that I was speaking out of my pain.) I was left with a powerful teaming about the importance of non judgmental listening as a conductor.

I think the best way to offer Playback to corporations would be to create a series of performances with the same group, so that trust would have time to build. Mixing performances with workshops in which participants could do Playback exercises along with writing their own stories would also be a way to structure the work. Finding organizations that trust that type of exploration and value the listening, trust, and connections that would grow out of such a project is essential. Having to meet specific goals or outcomes would get in the way of the process, though it would be fine and good to start each session with an issue or theme to explore that relates to diversity. Tying back to the use of dialogue in a teaming organization, "*Facilitators must continually bring forward people who have not spoken, and prompt them to add their views. They must regulate the flow of conversation, following a model of dialogue which invites people to suspend their assumptions and treat each other as colleagues. All the while, the facilitators*

*must ask people to explain why they said what they just said- to urge them to describe what's behind their thinking. If the facilitator has credibility, then people are quite willing to talk in this way."*19 I believe we have something to learn from this about the importance of getting a diverse group together and then insisting that all voices are heard.

The following list contains themes and questions to explore in a series of sessions focused on diversity. They are not in any specific order, and are just a beginning. I imagine as we work more in the corporate world the list will change and grow, and it would be great to use the IPTN to communicate about this. Our area ODN (Organizational Development Network) has topic groups that meet around issues, so maybe the IPTN would be interested in adopting a similar structure. With that said, a list of themes and questions the relate to diversity work:

- What you need to do to feel safe talking about diversity is-.
- What you need others to do so that you feel safe talking about diversity is
- For you, looking at the issue of diversity is important because
- If you could wave a magic wand, what you would create with respect to diversity is- .
- What's the first time you felt different?
- How did it feel? -Who was there to support and validate you?
- What's the most recent time you felt different?
- Again, how did it feel and who was there to support you?
- What I hope to achieve during this series about diversity is-.
- What I hope we as a group achieve during this series about diversity is
- What the first time you remember belonging
- What's the most recent time you remember belonging?
- What's a story about a friendship you have/had with someone different from you?
- What's a time when you were in conflict with someone different from you?
- What's a time when you felt supported or were helped by someone different from you?

I also believe that it is important for all groups to be able to meet by themselves to share their stories and work through issues specific to their own group, including identity development. This includes whites, who because of the privilege they have inherited in this society, are not forced to work on their cultural identity. Whites are not reminded daily that they are white and so often they cannot understand why people of color need to find pride in their identity, claiming that it increases the gap between people instead of closing it. A comment often made by whites is "why can't we all just forget about color- we're all the same underneath." This comment could only be made by a person who is not reminded daily, verbally or non-verbally, of their skin color or difference. In our society it does make a difference, and not acknowledging that difference is part of what keeps racism and many other "isms" in place.

An example from my own life that illustrates the reluctance white people have to do their own cultural identity work as whites com from a series of meetings on diversity that I attended with an intergenerational theatre company I belonged to at the time. There were about 50 members in the company, from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. Participants were asked to call out groups present in the room and I called out white. The group names were written on paper and hung around the room and people were then asked to move toward one of the groups they identified with. Each group was given the task of naming 5 things they wanted the whole company to know about their group and 5 things they never again wanted people to say or assume about their group. Although about 60-70 percent of the people in the room were white, I was one of 3 people whose chose to identify as white and we were by far the smallest group. (It was also interesting to note that the largest group identified as Jewish, and I got some insight that day into the difficulties between Jews and Blacks).

It is my belief that one way whites need to take an active role in eliminating racism is by meeting with each other to talk about how they are hurt by racism. They need to acknowledge their privilege and then consciously put it down. The need to reclaim their own cultural heritage, the one they gave up to belong to the mythological white group. They need to express to each other how guilty and powerless they feel, and support each other to take powerful steps toward eliminating racism and oppression. That is the only way that we as a united society will be able to rid ourselves of the erroneous labeling of black and white that have no basis in cultural reality, but hold great power over us and keep us divided.

The following list of questions is for white only groups. I imagine it will be a long time before these types of questions and groups will be found in the corporate sector, and I include them more for other playback people to work with in their own groups then for use in corporate trainings.

- -What you need to do to feel safe talking about diversity is
- -What you need others to do so that you feel safe talking about diversity is.
- -For you, looking at the issue of diversity is important because…
- -If you could wave a magic wand, what you would create with respect to diversity is.
- -What's the first time you remember being aware of skin color-yours or others? -What's the first friendship you had with a person of color?
- -What was racism like in your family when you were growing up?
- -What is a time you remember witnessing an oppressive act and what did you do?
- -If you could have done something different, what would it have been? -What is your own ethnic background?
- -How do you feel when people of color express their anger to you or around you?
- -Who are you angry with for the racism in the world today?
- -When's the last time you reached out to a person of color?

- -Are you aware of racist TV programs, advertising, movies, news broadcasts etc. and what are you doing about it?
- -What are you doing to eliminate racism?
- -What are the privileges of being "white"? -What are the costs?
- -What are your assumptions about the effects of color on class? (Do you assume all blacks are poor for example, or all Indians are scientists, mathematicians, or engineers?)
- -Do you talk about race or racism with your white friends? If not, why not?
- -Do you talk about race or racism with people other that whites? If so, why?
- -Do you speak up for more multicultural educational materials and subjects in public schools?
- -What keeps you from making friends with people of color?
- -Are you afraid of saying the wrong thing around people of color? Do you censor yourself.
- -What do you love about white people? -What do you hate about white people?
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  - I think it's important to mention here that one way whites perpetuate racism is by assuming that people of color are willing to give us a hand at all times as we work on racism issues. I have frequently heard people of color lament that they wish white people would do their own work and that they are tired of being the ones who have to teach white people about racism. Sometimes it's just too painful for a person of color to listen to us while we express our feelings about how we've been hurt by racism, and that's OK. Our pain, even if it's tied to fighting racism, should not have to come first. Even venting about how much we dislike the current oppressive society we live in may be hard for a person of color to listen to. This may have played a role in what happened in Perth when a white man told his story. What is essential is that we don't make assumptions and that we are willing to take responsibility for our mistakes. Anyone committed to ending oppression will make mistakes, particularly the oppressors. If we don't, then probably we are playing it too safe. Being able to own our mistakes and apologize to those whom we hurt or offended is a big part of the work. In the words of Ameja Three Rivers about what is needed in taking action against oppression, "*Treasure your own good heart and good intentions. Don't expect anti-racism work to always be easy. Don't be afraid of pain and discomfort. And don't be afraid to grow.*"[20]

I'd like to close this look at diversity with two more quotes from Amoja Three Rivers, taken from her publication "Cultural Etiquette".

"Race is an arbitrary and meaningless concept. Race among humans don't exist. If there ever was any such thing as race, (which there isn't) there has been so much crisscrossing of genes for

the last 500,000 years, that it would have lost all meaning anyway. There are no real divisions between us, only a continuum of variations that constantly change, as we come together and separate according to the flow and movement of human population."21

"Sometimes white people who are drawn to other people's cultures are hungry for a way of life with more depth and meaning than what we find in 20th century Western Society. Don't forget that every white person alive today is also descended from tribal peoples. If you are white, don't neglect your own ancient traditions. They are as valid as anybody else's, and the ways of your own ancestors need to be honored, remembered, and carried on into the future."22

Conclusion

It is precisely this hunger for a way of life with more depth and meaning that, along with the growing awareness of the fragility of our environment, is driving the current paradigm shift in business. We are in the midst of it and the outcome is uncertain. Current reality can look very different, depending on where you look and with what mental models. It's like the old Sufi tale about the three blind men who are attempting to describe the elephant they have encountered. The first man, who is holding the ear describes it as rough and carpet-like. The second, who is holding the trunk describes it as hollow and flexible like a reed. The third, who's arms are wrapped around a leg describe it as solid and rooted like a tree. Our challenge is to see the whole elephant and from the vantage point begin to look at how Playback can help the current business elephant make the changes we all need it to make.

The changes we are all being asked to make (or will soon be asked to make) are not easy ones. In the words of Mikhail Gorbachev, "I feel that all mankind is entering a new age, and that the world is beginning to obey new laws and logic, to which we have yet to adjust ourselves." We will be asked to give up patterns of being and in some cases, lifestyles that are comfortable, safe, and known. In keeping with systems theory, we will need to apply our inner resources of consciousness and creativity to all aspects of our lives and not just to our work lives. The good news is that the incentive is high, and there is much for all of us to gain from entering the white waters of change.

"Most people would like to work in a setting without the "we-they" mentality, in which people are treated like adults, and with open sharing of information throughout the business. They would thrive in a workplace that offers widespread authority for task and strategy and allows an experience of community without hierarchical or division barriers. They would appreciate doing business when it gives flexibility to workers and offers trust and freedom for dissent. They would benefit from a policy that honors individuals for their diverse qualities and their connections to each other, that gives personal development equal priority with making profits, that has an orientation to the surrounding society and environment, that places intrinsic value in the product or service, and that offers ownership for all." 23

It is my belief that we as Playback practitioners have a great deal to offer organizations in this time of transition. We model ancient wisdom that could be thought of as new technologies. We rely on an interdependence that indigenous people have known about and honored for ages and scientists are just beginning to validate. In a simple and sometimes metaphoric way (much like nature herself) we give the gift of clear vision, and bring the necessary qualities of respect, compassion, caring, creativity, humor, and acceptance to our work. We model team learning and apply systems theory in a way that sometimes looks effortless.

When I look at current reality through the lens of Playback, I feel hope. I believe that our greatest gift consists of this: rekindling hope in the human spirit.

Notes

1) Ray, Michael and Rinzler, Alan, *"The New Paradigm in Business: Emerging Strategies for Leadership and Organizational Change"*, (New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1993), p. xi.

2) Ibid.

3) Ibid.

4) Ibid, p. xiii.

5) Ibid, p. 5.

6) Ibid.

7) Ibid, p. 7.

8) Ibid, p.127.

9) Senge, Peter, and others, *"The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization"*, (New York, Doubleday, 1994), p.298.

10) Ray, Michael and Rinzler, Alan, *"The New Paradigm in Business: Emerging Strategies for Leadership and Organizational Change"*, (New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1993), p. 132.

11) Senge, Peter, and others, *"The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization"*, (New York, Doubleday, 1994)

12) Ibid, p. 376-377.

13) Ray, Michael and Rinzler, Alan, *"The New Paradigm in Business: Emerging Strategies for Leadership and Organizational Change"*, (New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1993), p. 136.

14) Senge, Peter, and others, *"The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization"*, (New York, Doubleday, 1994), p. 87.

15) Senge, Peter, *"The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization"*, (New York, Doubleday, 1990), P. 75, chapter 4.

16) Ibid, p. 171.

17) Lanoix, Winnie, ED. D. and Finley, Laurine, PH. D., ABC of Diversity Training, Multicultural Training and Research Institute, Temple Umiversity, 1996.

18) Owen, Chery Avery, conference notes from *"Culture, Power, and Transformation"*, Multicultural Training and Research Institute, Temple University, 1996.

19) Senge, Peter, and others, *"The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization"*, (New York, Doubleday, 1994), p. 428.

20) Three Rivers, Amoja, *"Cultural Etiquette: A Guide for the Well Intended*, (VA, Market Wimmin, 1990), p. 27.

21) Ibid, p. 25.

22) Ibid, p. 24.

23) Ray, Michael and Rinzler, Alan, *"The New Paradigm in Business: Emerging Strategies for Leadership and Organizational Change"*, (New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1993), p. 124.

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5) McFague, Sallie, *Present Time*, (Seattle, WA), April 1996

6) McIntosh, Peggy, *"White Privilege"*, Temple University, 1998.

7) Owen, Chery Avery, conference notes *from "Culture, Power, and Transformation"*, Multicultural Training and Research Institute, Temple University, 1996.

8) Ray, Michael and Rinzler, Alan, *"The New Paradigm in Business: Emerging Strategies for Leadership and Organizational Change"*, (New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1993).

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