Generative Organization—Where did it come from?

Ron Westrum

Emeritus Professor of Sociology

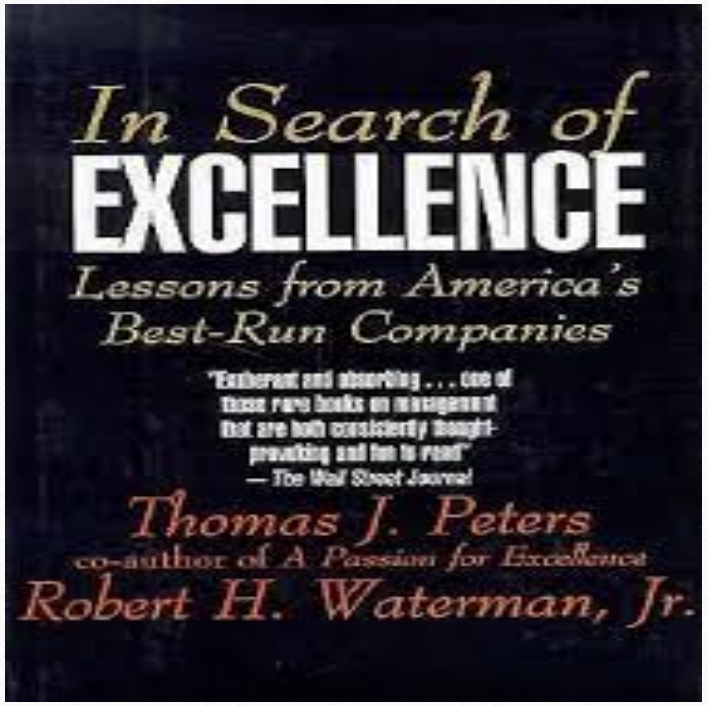
Eastern Michigan University

One could argue that it started with a television program

STAR TREK

- 1966

And then this book appeared



Tom Peters
and
Bob Waterman

But actually, it came about in a different way….

- I got interested in high performance teams, all kinds of teams……

High Performance Teams

- **Combat Units**
- **Jazz ensembles**
- **High Creativity in Science**
- **Medical Safety Work**
- **Aviation – Space Systems**
- **Businesses that served as a model for others**

An Example---China Lake Naval Weapons Center

- In WWII, wartime culture and Caltech combined to provide a facility to test rockets in Mojave Desert (1943)
- Scientists, faced with wartime pressures, cut bureaucracy and did what seemed to make sense. O.S.R.D. = a brain trust!
- At China Lake, this creative culture continued after WWII.
- An example of a system that came out of the resulting culture---*Sidewinder* Air to Air Missile, better than Falcon and Sparrow

Bill McLean and the Sidewinder

And in practice, it looks like this

I wrote a book about China Lake

Sidewinder: Creative Missile Development at China Lake 1999

At about the same time I read about a Navy ship that was well skippered

Captain Michael Abrashoff—USS *Benfold*

- The Benfold won the Spokane Trophy in 1970 and 1971 for outstanding combat readiness.
- But an earlier Report, "Excellence in the Surface Navy" had already shown the kind of captain considered first-rate, who created a can-do crew with an excellent culture of shared responsibility and information.

Another Example: C.R.M.

- In the 1970's, crew-caused accidents were becoming more important in aviation.
- There were problems with Information Flow in the cockpit
- So methods were sought to open up the flow of information, making full use of crew mental resources. Cockpit Resource Management.
- But other teamwork situations also called for this kind of sharing, for instance in nuclear power and medical theatre operations.

And then, the same principle for larger networks

- **High Reliability** became a new discipline academically, but it was used in industry before the professors discovered it. It was essential for electrical power systems and air transportation systems. Big networks, close inter-relations, cooperation.
- If you didn't have faith, then you thought there would be "**normal accidents.**" In third world countries, there are plenty of "normal accidents." The ***Joola***, a ferry that sank off Senegal, had higher casualties than the Titanic.

Clearly, Generative Systems Work

In Research and Development

- On shipboard
- On aircraft
- And on all kinds of teams

A key principle is information flow

- Maximum use of available Information Flow -- "IF"
- And how do you get maximum IF?
- You encourage people to share what they know with the people who need it. You build trust and respect.
- Are there other ways than people? Of course, but people are primary.

And so, we can classify the information flow environment

- Pathological---Culture serves to elevate the leaders
- Bureaucratic---Culture keeps adherence to the *rules*
- Generative---Culture promotes the organization's *mission*

And thus this choice of cultures

- Has a major role in the fulfillment of the organization's mission

But that’s not all

- Work is where we live for much of the day.
- Work shapes our mental and our physical health.
- Work shapes our vision of ourselves.
- What we experience at work is taken home to our families, and shapes our social and political participation.
- A bad culture is costly in many ways.

So a good culture at work builds people

- And we need that!

Thank You