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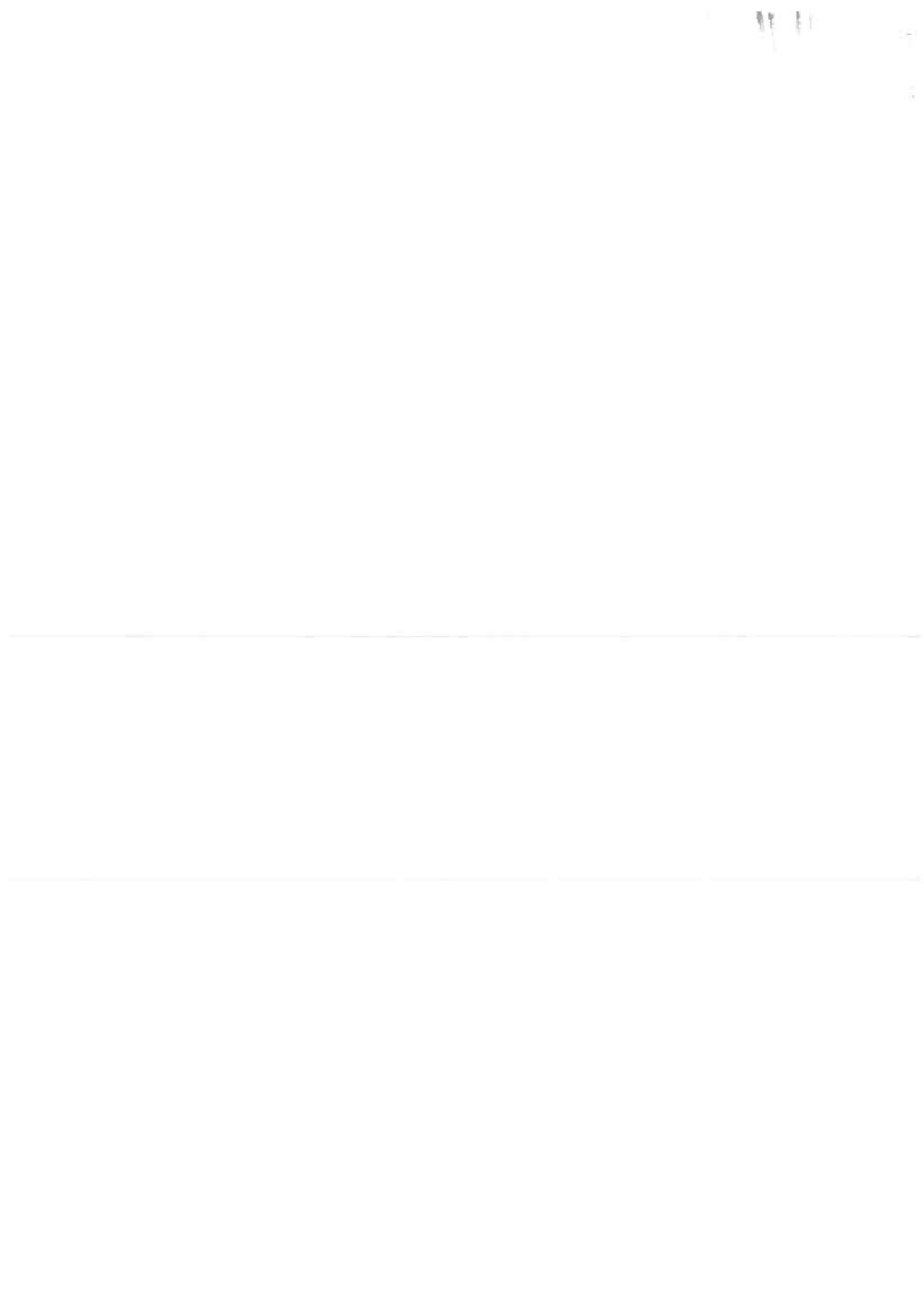
Cover Design: Dennis Stillwell, IMEX Exchange

Distributed in the English language in Singapore, the Philippines, and
Southeast Asia by Toppan Co., Ltd., Singapore and in the English language in
Japan by Toppan Co., Ltd., Tokyo, Japan.

Printed in the United States of America

2

The Satir Change Model

If your heart is a volcano,
how shall you expect
flowers to bloom
in your hands?
— Kahlil Gibran

The Learning Curve Model is an *averaging* model. If you ask people to describe major changes they've experienced, they will tell you many things that simply don't appear in the Learning Curve Model. They may sketch a learning curve like Figure 1-8, but most of their attention and energies will be concerned with their emotional reactions to the change. Time after time, it's these emotional reactions that seem to confound the change planners, because they lack a place for them in all of their models discussed in Chapter 1. To manage change effectively, you must understand precisely those emotional reactions that the other change models exclude, because human systems do not change unless the individuals change, one at a time.

2.1 Overview of the Model

One of the cornerstones of the family therapist Virginia Satir's work was her model of how change takes place.[1] The Satir Change Model is a very general

model that applies to individuals as well as systems of individuals. The model describes four major stages of change, the transitions between stages, as well as "meta-change" (changing the way change takes place). It describes how each stage of change feels, how it affects thought processes and bodily functions. It also suggests what kinds of interventions are appropriate in each stage, a subject which runs through this entire book, starting in Chapter 3.

I have found the insights from this model essential to the successful transformation of software organizations to cultures that are capable of producing higher-quality software, cheaper and faster. I take what is useful from all the other models, but the Satir Change Model is, for me, by far the most useful. I find that my clients can relate directly to the model, and they are able to use it to analyze contemplated courses of action.

The Satir Change Model says that change takes place in four major stages, called

1.   Late Status Quo (or Old Status Quo, as it is called when it is *very* late)

2.   Chaos

3.   Integration and Practice (or sometimes just Integration, for short)

4.   New Status Quo

The model also describes a higher level of change, or meta-change, which involves changing the way we change. It describes what kinds of interventions are helpful, and which are harmful, in each stage. The model also describes how different personalities, or temperaments, respond to the various stages, and to change in general. It accounts for different kinds of information feedback during change processes, as well as different levels of performance (Figure 2-1).
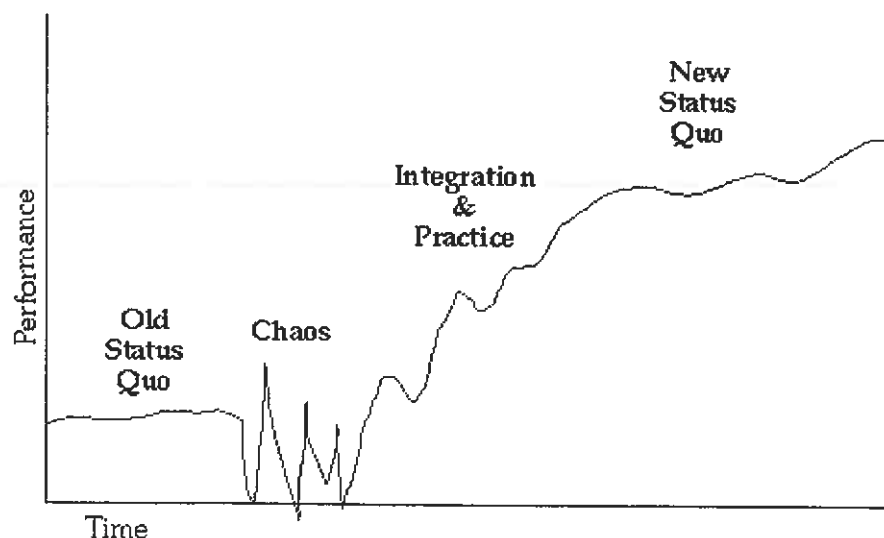

Figure 2-1.   The Satir Change Model shows how performance changes in four different stages of change.

Let's start examining the Satir Change Model by sketching the four stages. Because the model says that change is an unending series of cycles, we can start anywhere. We'll begin with the stage in which everything seems all right: Late Status Quo.

2.2 Stage 1: Late Status Quo

In this stage, the system (either an individual or a group) has developed a set of predictions and expectations. Indeed, Late Status Quo represents a kind of success; it is the logical outcome of a series of attempts to get all the outputs of the system under control.

In Late Status Quo, everything is familiar and in balance, but as Figure 2-2 suggests, that balance may require various parts of the system to have an unequal role in maintaining that balance. The question to ask during Late Status Quo is, "What is each part paying to keep up this state of affairs?"
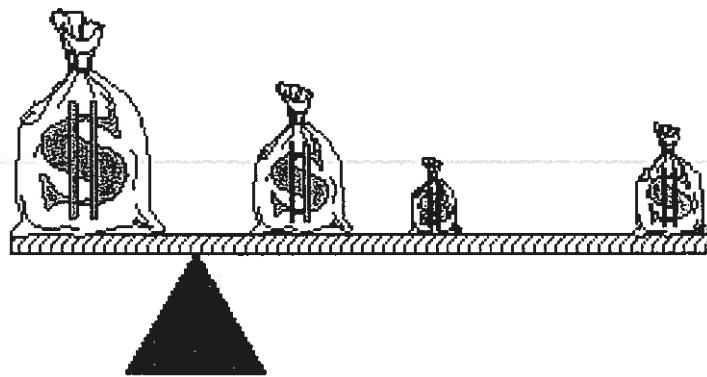
Figure 2-2.   The Late Status Quo stage of the Satir Change Model is characterized by a balance, but a balance in which the various parts are paying different prices to maintain it.

In Late Status Quo, the cost each part is paying is demonstrated by the symptoms that part is displaying in its state of unhealth. Recognizing the Late Status Quo stage is important in software quality dynamics because it always precedes the so-called crisis. The Satir Change Model recognizes that the crisis is not a sudden event, but merely the sudden realization that things have been very unhealthy for a long time.

There are many familiar examples of Late Status Quo, both in everyday life and in software projects. Here are a few:

- ❑ An individual has a bad heart and smokes two packs a day, but plays racquetball intensively once a week to compensate.
- ❑ A family has an alcoholic father who abuses his wife and children, but when sober he is super-loving and buys them expensive gifts.
- ❑ A software company has outgrown its obsolete building that would be expensive to replace, though the environment is lowering productivity.
- ❑ A software development team supports three low-performing members by everyone else doing a bit extra and nobody saying anything about it.
- ❑ A twelve-year-old inventory system is under extensive and growing maintenance, but nobody thinks about it.
- ❑ A software product development team has evolved over a period of eight years, and really can no longer produce anything innovative.

You can recognize the Late Status Quo stage by both personal and organizational symptoms. People may be experiencing anxiety, generalized nervousness, and gastrointestinal problems. Constipation is a perfect metaphor for the over-control that characterizes Late Status Quo.

In the constipated organization, it seems impossible to get anything new accomplished. There is no sense of creativity, no sense of innovation. Absenteeism creeps up for no apparent reason. People don't feel good, but have a difficult time locating any specific cause for their ailments. The most important sign that the system is in Late Status Quo is denial: the inability or unwillingness to recognize all the other symptoms, or to attach enough significance to them to warrant doing anything.

2.2.1 Upsetting the Balance: The Foreign Element

Systems stay in Late Status Quo until something happens that the people in the system can no longer deny. Satir calls this "something" the *foreign element*. The new element may be from inside or outside the organization, but it is always outside in the sense that it is part of the randomness that is always outside the scope of the system's controller and upsets the balance (Figure 2-3). I'll never forget one manager on a desperately troubled project who got the news that a key employee had quit, gotten married, and left the country. He stared disbelievingly for a long moment, then muttered, "She *can't* do that. It's not part of my plan." That was a foreign element.

The system cannot simply ignore the foreign element, though it may try. The system usually tries to expel the foreign element and return to Late Status Quo, because, as Satir says,

Familiarity is always more powerful than comfort.

All too often, the system succeeds in getting back to the old, uncomfortable stage, and remains in Late Status Quo until another foreign element arrives.[2]
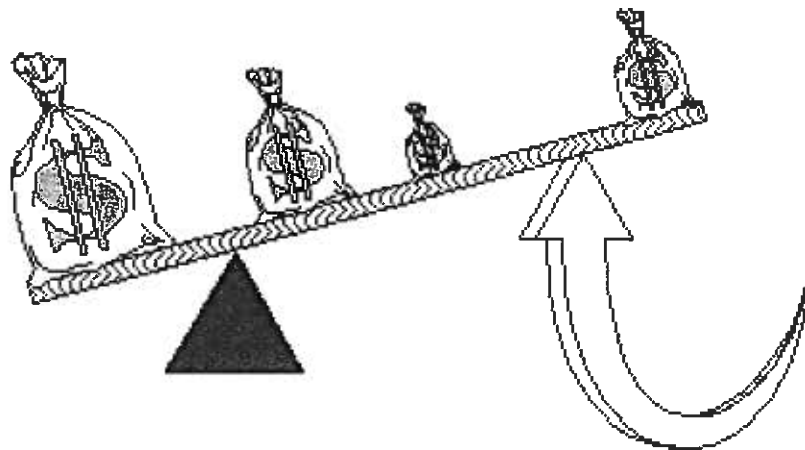
Figure 2-3.   The foreign element comes from outside and upsets the balance of the Late
                 Status Quo stage.

Here are a few examples of foreign elements:

- The individual has chest pains when playing racquetball.
- The alcoholic father crashes the car and kills two pedestrians.
- Rats get into the software company's obsolete building and chew on the removable disks that store the entire library archive.
- A critical team member on the software development team resigns or is promoted, leaving an inadequate team to perform all the work.
- An audit reveals that there are $23 million in parts missing from the twelve-year-old inventory system.
- A competitor announces an innovative software product, and the software product development team has no idea how to respond.

You can recognize the foreign element by the way people become protective and defensive. They look and feel tight, which can be seen in their tight and shallow breathing. Their senses tend to be diminished, so they don't see or hear things they usually notice.

At the organizational level, the foreign element may be the only thing that arouses any kind of new activity. If you examine the content of the activity, however, you'll see that most of it is simply an attempt to expel the foreign element. One approach is to tighten internal controls: Issue lots of memos about locking doors and filling out forms correctly; hold oppressive meetings about getting to work on time or reducing expenses; mandate more frequent and detailed status reporting.

Another approach to expelling the foreign element is to waste a great deal of time and emotional energy doing studies to figure out "How did we get here?" rather than "Where are we? What next?" Yet another is to attack the outside world, which is seen as the source of the trouble: Appeal for government assistance, or sue somebody. The one thing you *never* hear is, "Oh, my, that's a clear indication we'll have to change something about the way we do our daily business."

Many of the foreign elements experienced by parts of an organization are introduced by misguided management actions, such as

- The development manager adds another project to a group that is already overloaded.
- Upper management takes away a critical resource but refuses to extend a schedule.
- In order to help an exhausted team catch up, managers increase the length of the required work week.

To complicate a difficult management problem even when managers are making a sensible attempt to change the Late Status Quo organization, their interventions are frequently seen by workers as foreign elements. These workers genuinely feel that such management moves are a threat to the continued existence of the organization, and that they must deny or defer or deflect them in order to ensure the safety of the organization. Such interventions from on high, these people believe, show that management doesn't really understand what it takes to run this organization *as it has always run.* Sometimes, however, what management wants to do is run a *different* organization, so naturally the interventions will be seen as a threat to the Old Status Quo.

2.3 Stage 2: Chaos

Sometimes, management, after experiencing these denials or deferrals or deflections, simply gives up trying to intervene. Eventually, however, some foreign element cannot be denied, deferred, or deflected, and someone acknowledges that the emperor is naked. With this recognition, the system (individual or group) becomes disarranged and the system goes into Stage 2: Chaos (Figure 2-4).

In Chaos, old predictions no longer work. Old expectations are not fulfilled. As feared, the Old Status Quo system has been disrupted. People try random behavior, or try reverting to even earlier behavior patterns, perhaps from childhood. They desperately seek sweeping, magical solutions, because they are operating with reduced sensing and thinking ability.

Chaos is definitely not the time to make long-term decisions.
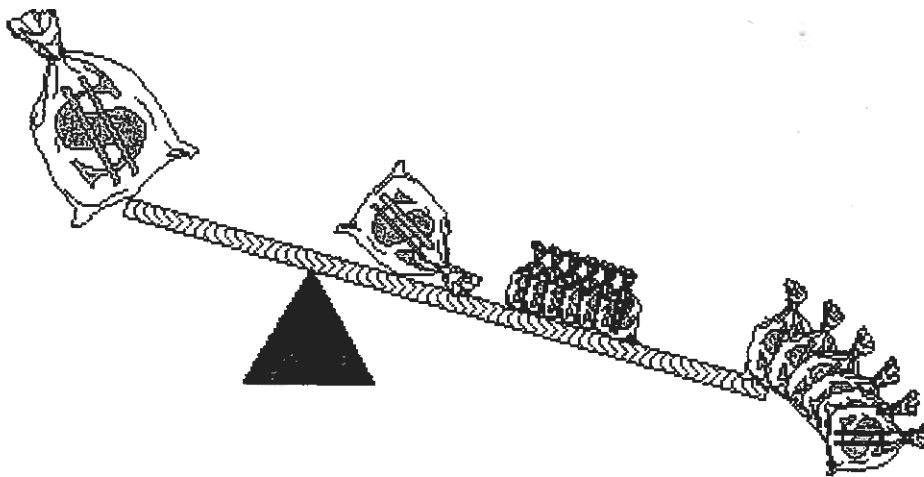
Figure 2-4.   In the Chaos stage, the old balance is gone, and nothing works the way it
                   used to.

It may not be easy for people in Chaos to acknowledge it's happening to them,
but it's easy to spot examples of Chaos in *other* people (Figure 2-5):

- ❏ The individual starts playing racquetball left-handed, and only with
     certain opponents.
- ❏ Mother breaks down into sobbing fits. Junior, age 9, starts sucking
     his thumb and wetting his bed.
- ❏ People start losing their office keys, jamming the vending machines,
     spilling copier toner, and generally not functioning.
- ❏ The software team surges into violent conflicts, followed by sudden
     and total withdrawal.
- ❏ Everyone bypasses the inventory system, going directly to the parts
     bins to take what they need.
- ❏ The old reliable software product starts crashing and producing
     bizarre responses after minor maintenance. People don't show up at
     meetings or answer messages.

People in Chaos may be shaky, dizzy, or off balance, and they generally suffer
problems of the central nervous system, such as tics, nail-biting, and mysteri-
ous rashes. Back, head, and neck problems are common.

   (If you want to experience a very mild, but very clear, form of Chaos,
clasp your hands with your fingers interlaced. Notice how comfortable that
feels, and whether the right or left thumb is underneath. Then reclasp your
hands with the thumbs reversed. The tiny odd feeling you experience is an
example of Chaos. Now imagine this magnified by a thousand or a million,

and you will have some idea of what it feels like when, for example, somebody hears that his or her job is being eliminated.)
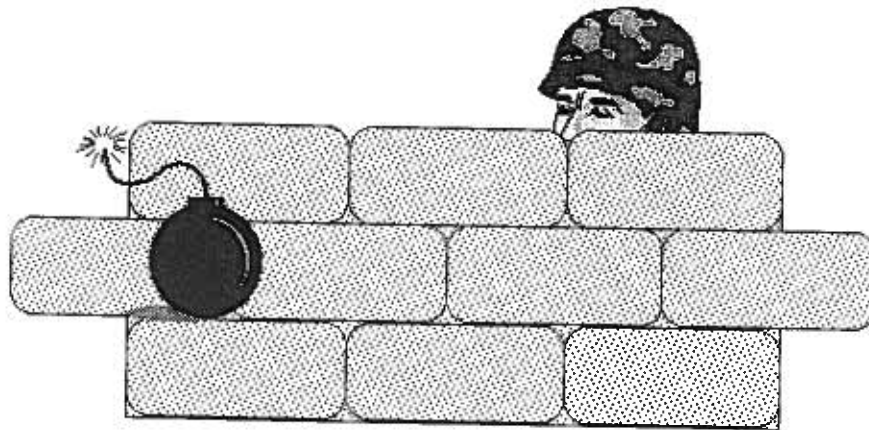

Figure 2-5.   People in a system that's in Chaos feel crazy. They are afraid and vulnerable. Their old survival fears are aroused, and they become extremely defensive and alienated.

In the chaotic organization, awareness and effectiveness may oscillate between high and practically zero. People encounter people they've never seen before, and functions they never knew existed. Some startling new ideas may emerge, but if they work at all, they only work for a short time.

2.4 Stage 3: Integration and Practice

Eventually, one of these new ideas seems to rise above the noise of Chaos and people see the beginning of a new possibility. This is the *transforming idea*—the "Aha!" that can change everything and, with sufficient practice, can lead toward a new integration. Just as the foreign element marks the beginning of the Chaos stage, the transforming idea marks the beginning of its end.

The transforming idea often arrives with the feeling described in the biblical phrase "the scales fell from my eyes," or the relief that arrives when the chiropractor realigns your spine. It is often seen as a new birth or a honeymoon. Chaotic feelings disappear, and in moments of apparently clear vision, everything looks like it's going to be solved, perhaps by turning old ways upside down (Figure 2-6).