# In Case You Needed Evidence: COVID-19 as Modest Affirmation for Ten Surprisingly Still-Contentious Human and Organizational Change Related Tenets

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**Abstract**
**Purpose**: The domain of organizational change tends to favour tired and disproven principles and frameworks in shaping its approach. At the same time, it usually sidelines more controversial yet solid and substantiated tenets. This paper highlights ten of these latter ideas for which COVID-19 has provided recent, tangible evidentiary support, and discusses the nature of that evidence. It concludes with some recommendations shaped by these themes.
**Design/methodology/approach**: The author offers empirical support for the ideas provided, derived from the COVID-19 crisis, our response to it, and our behaviour under its sway.
**Findings**: The COVID-19-associated evidence validates the ten often under-represented or under-appreciated ideas cited. Based on this, recommendations can be made regarding organizational change in order to harness the power of these ideas more effectively.
**Originality/value**: The paper is seized with the moment in which COVID-19 has placed us, and seeks to exploit it to the particular benefit of the domain of organizational change.

**Keywords:** Change, evolution, complexity, adaptation, crisis, third places, COVID-19

Faith
Faith is an island in the setting sun
But proof, yes
Proof is the bottom line for everyone
    — Paul Simon, "Proof", *The Rhythm of the Saints* (1990)

**Preamble**
The study of human organizations can often be a frustrating field to occupy, as nearly all of us are implicated thereby; hence, there is often no shortage of opinions about why things are as they are, what should be done to improve them, and what conceptual scaffolding should underpin these explorations.
What results, all too often, is a rather populist take on domains of interest in organizational study, with ideas that gain currency predominating over those that have proven their efficacy; surprisingly, there is often little intersection between the two. Even without the exacerbating contribution of social media in this respect in recent times, there is still a vicious cycle effect around 'fad' ideas that gives them a leg up over Moore's (1991) "chasm" where they might more rightly have plunged to their doom. This happens, often, despite these theories being disproven in healthy debate in more academic settings or through empirically disappointing outcomes in praxis.

At the same time, more substantive concepts are all too often ignored, forgotten, or lost in the fog of disinformation. This is unfortunate, as the forgone value can be immense. Occasionally, some intrepid researcher will uncover one of these obscure treasures and attempt to resurrect and sanctify it; sadly, though, these efforts are often fleeting, the results ephemeral, and the outcome muted.

In the end, therefore, deserving and beneficial ideas are often not widely held; instead, disproven and tired shibboleths abound. While this is certainly a phenomenon that can be observed in many fields, in the study of change in human organizations we find a ready and replete exemplar.

Occasionally, circumstances both unforeseen and dramatic, a "violent unknown event" (*The Falls*, 1980) can provide an opportunity to see the light and expose some dramatic flaws in our understanding. COVID-19 provides just such an opportunity.

The remainder of this paper will attempt to highlight ten such denigrated, subsumed ideas whose veracity has been substantiated by the coronavirus and what it has evinced. While it is unlikely that fad-chasing *hoi polloi* will have been attuned to the faint signals of relevance emerging from the noise and confusion the crisis has engendered, it is hoped that this paper can provide some measure of illumination into what we all should have been seeing, and what we should be learning from it.

Some of these ideas are patterns; some, principles; others, mere axioms. Regardless, all have the heft and legitimacy of such statements as humans once used to carve into stone or enshrine in sacred texts. Their gravitas, *in toto*, should give us pause, make us more discriminating about what is sense and what nonsense in our conceptualizing, and encourage us to remember the good ideas.

## 1. The World Is Complex

The application of complexity science, more tangibly relevant in natural domains such as biology and physics, to human organizations has never really achieved critical mass, even though diluted and skewed vestiges of its fundaments have been absorbed into agile practices, and certain modelling frameworks based on complexity principles (Stacey, 1992; Snowden & Boone, 2007) are still viable and evolving.

Instead, the business world continues to value simplicity and simple models, a flawed and fruitless approach to viewing human organizations (see Falconer, 2011); instead, organic metaphors provide a much more apt conceptualization and a better construct for leveraging complexity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has foregrounded several useful ideas from this field.

The failure of models, even the complicated ones proffered by Forrester (1969; 1971) and his adherents, was observed early on by the Club of Rome participants (Meadows *et al*, 1972) when staring down huge but ultimately inadequate economic, ecosystemic, and climatic models, and while the demarcation between complicated and complex systems which Cilliers (1998) introduced (and which Snowden adopted) now has many years of exposure, it remains largely unknown or ignored; the terms remain interchangeable, especially amongst lazy journalists. COVID-19 has certainly illustrated the unreliability of models, as projections and expectations have fallen by the wayside one after another; still, the acknowledgment that viral spread is likely a complex phenomenon that will by definition confound complicated models (and probably most complicated machine-learning algorithms) has had almost no airtime. Even the old saw "all models are wrong but some are useful" (Box, 1979: p. 202) has been tested; most, if not all, of the espoused models have proven useless and deleterious.

The primacy of interconnections over nodes in complex systems is another fundament that the pandemic has brought to the fore with the greater relative importance of contact tracing over

the tracking of basic infection rates, geolocating, and demographics becoming increasingly apparent. Who has got it matters not, in relative terms; where it has spread to, as a result, does. Surely, also, Lorenz' infamous "butterfly effect" (1963), as reified perhaps in another species once in some Wuhan wet-market, shows vividly that we are now both beneficiaries and victims of our global interconnectedness.

At the microbiotic level, the challenge in explaining how the virus works, and will work, has demonstrated that an entire universe of natural phenomena, and not just at the scale of the very small, remains beyond our grasp, either because we have not been able to figure out how the constituent elements work or because we just have not encountered them yet. Such is the wheelhouse of complex phenomena: they confound our ability to grasp how they operate, usually because we are trying to use simple or complicated models that cannot describe them, and sometimes because we have no models at all.

Uncertainty has been a watchword of the pandemic. How did it start? How will I be affected? When will it end? What does it all mean? How should I respond? How can I help? All these questions prove elusive, with no clear answers. Uncertainty is, however, one of the defining characteristics of complex systems; they are not deterministic or linear and can often present an infuriating range of possible trajectories. They are also continuously evolving, so the notion of an 'outcome' is evanescent, ephemeral, subjective; instead, local structures can emerge, but will not persist, and myriad observable phenomena may briefly cohere, and then disperse. If this sounds familiar with reference to the pandemic, we should not be surprised; we should likewise refrain from thinking this state of affairs is in any way specific to the virus or to the pandemic, but, rather, that it is characteristic of nearly every facet of life on earth, if we are just receptive to their rhythms.

## 2. The Tragedy of the Commons
The old dichotomy between Hobbes' selfish man (1651) and Locke's noble man (1690) still reverberates no doubt, but it is really the seminal work of ecologist Hardin (1968; see also Lloyd, 1833) that puts paid to Locke's image of man as a uniquely and smugly altruistic species. Instead, posits Hardin, when faced with the choice of behaving with selfish self-interest or with communally-beneficial altruism, humans will choose the former; his example of hypothetical agrarians and their cows seems quaint now relative to those examples that history has provided us since (nuclear war was in fact Hardin's lead-in example).

While this realization may be depressing, our predominant reaction to the notion has been self-denial, a refusal to recognize ourselves for what we are. While there are certainly examples of selfless action to which most of us can refer, the point here is that, in the main, this is not our default behaviour. We protect ourselves, we protect our tribe, and everyone else needs to do the same.

The early pandemic platitudes of "we're all in this together" seemed well-meaning, but pasted up in shop windows seemed to translate more into "please keep buying our stuff", and, as a result, faded quickly; clearly people have not been behaving as though the collective mattered, so the rallying-cry has seemed emptier and emptier.

Ready examples, in fact, are ubiquitous and numerous (Smith, 2020), and include:
- the frantic buyers of staple goods (especially in the early days of the periodic 'waves') (Lufkin, 2020; Bentall *et al*, 2021);
- the rule breakers (in the main, those who gather in numbers, unsafely, despite being told not to) (Harris, 2020; Hearn, 2020; Elliott, 2021);
- the not-our-problem politicians, who refuse to mandate safe behaviour in their environs as though they inhabit a remote, walled island nation of fit, immune superhumans (Gonsalves & Yamey, 2020; Maqbool, 2020);

- the anti-vaxxers, who will ultimately not submit to being jabbed and, hence, will continue to be disease carriers and spreaders (Ball, 2020; Burki, 2020; Pullan & Dey, 2021);
- the anti-maskers, or the cannot-be-bothered-maskers, casting their potentially germy spittle to the four winds (Jarry, 2020; Marcus, 2020; Howard *et al*, 2021; Taylor & Asmundson, 2021);
- the proprioception-deficient physical-distancing challenged;
- the sidewalk or pathway hogs, who alone, or especially with their walking-abreast friends or family, huge strollers, accompanying children on scooters, dogs on long leashes, etc., render physical distancing, or even getting past them at all, impossible;
- the sidewalk game-of-chicken-players, who refuse to step off the path, forcing those they encounter to move to the street to avoid their germy, selfish selves, and then not acknowledging the event in the least;
- the sidewalk conversationalists, who feel that as long as they are sufficiently far apart, their unmasked aerosol-laden conversation space, now being the only throughfare on the path, magically presents no risk to others;
- the runners who seem unable or unwilling to confine their spittle distribution to non-peak times;
- the store hogs, who cause long, snaking lines outside (especially smaller) stores by entering with their entire family and/or by being woefully ineffective in getting in and out with dispatch; and
- the supermarket-floor-direction-arrow anarchists.

This list is, of course, both provincial and subjective. Each of us could make such a list, possibly quite different from the one above. Some of us may see ourselves in the list above. The point is less about specific transgressions and more about the fact that COVID-19's tragedy has been made all the worse with the addition of Hardin's. It also makes recent assertions about the inherent kindness and altruism in humans (Bregman, 2020) difficult to square amongst all the countervailing empirical evidence.

## 3. Humans Are Adaptive, Not Resilient
It is unclear whether this is a fundamental problem of lexicographical ignorance, catachresis, or carelessness, but these two words do not mean the same thing. Here I willfully throw lazy journalists, politicians, senior management, et al, under the bus, as they blithely use them interchangeably, which is wrong; however, even management science domain academics (Hamel & Välikangas, 2003) are not without guilt in this regard.

While both address systemic response to external perturbations, resilience specifically refers to a return to *precisely* the original systemic state, pre-perturbation, while adaptation refers to the process of the system reaching a *new* state, similar to the original, perhaps, but different – and better, ultimately – but, more specifically, now inclusive of the perturbation and its associated response.

While we perhaps see how this plays out in natural ecosystems, we are generally less willing to admit it describes human systems, communities, and organizations. We see it as an admission of weakness that we are unable to recover from a shock. This inability to admit that we are an adaptive species is not only perplexing, it is harmful: we can resist the natural flow of things and hence not benefit from our response to change, suffering the same level of systemic shock every time.

To some extent, we *have* admitted it to ourselves this time. During the pandemic, the phrase "the new normal", used to refer to both the exigent realities of the in-pandemic period and the

likely or potential future state, has become ubiquitous, whereas the notion of "returning to normal" has dimmed. So, like it or not, we are adapting.

Adaptation is a natural, evolutionary process. Resilience is abrupt, artificial, and forced. When we think we are being resilient, we use words like 'pivot', 'agility', and 'disruption', but these are rear-view-mirror words, jarring and deterministic; we use them to describe, in hindsight, what we think happened to us. Ultimately, though, they are wrongheaded; instead, we adapted, we evolved, we grew stronger. It will be interesting to see, when the coronavirus is finally behind us, what words we will use.

## 4. The "Burning Platform" Is a Viable Catalyst

When Conner (1993) introduced the sad metaphor of the Piper Alpha offshore rig catastrophe of 1988, it seemed to resonate with strategists who were unable to effect strategic change in their organizations without there being a crisis to resolve. Some (Dumaine, 1993) have even suggested that, when there is no crisis, one could be manufactured to the same effect. While there are certainly enough examples of organizations who were unable to change even when there *was* a crisis (Kodak and Blockbuster come to mind from recent years), this metaphor stuck until fairly recently when a backlash toward the concept (Conner, 2012; Frahm, 2017; Gupta, 2018) has emerged.

In fact, the idea was little more than a dramatic and more catchily-named version of Lee's (1966) well-established model of push and pull factors, reapplied from the domain of human migration to that of organizational change. In Lee's model, a panoply of positive and negative factors in both the origin and destination will always contribute to the act of moving and its timing.

Yet, now that COVID-19 has served up a crisis with little to no precursor, we can see firsthand what happens when the platform is truly burning, and, if we are attentive and discerning, we might be able to learn from the situation. While it is unfortunate that this crisis was required to show us the way, not taking advantage of the lessons here would be doubly tragic.

Notably, several broad transformations that were hitherto showing very long cycles have demonstrated the kind of accelerated change that a crisis can engender. Examples include:

- Predictions about remote workforces, along with the viability and benefits, have been articulated for some time now (see Nilles, 1975), but to some extent stalled in the starting blocks, particularly amidst somewhat neanderthal viewpoints such as those of Melissa Mayer (Miller & Rampell, 2013). Now, however, all has been proven in a nonce; putting the genie back in the bottle at this point seems unlikely (Kniffin *et al*, 2021), and, if anything, the whole notion now has the sort of legs its early proponents probably never imagined. It may also have knock-on negative effects on some other, somewhat middle-ground compromises such as hotelling and open-plan offices (see Dix, 1994; Berger, 1999; Gladwell, 2000; Brennan *et al*, 2002; Kim *et al*, 2016) which never seemed like sensible options or possessed of any of the same benefits for morale and employee satisfaction.

- Telepresence, as it was then called (Mantei *et al*, 1991), has been promoted for decades. For sensible reasons (most people work proximately, in the office; time zones preclude sufficient flexibility; technology has been slow to mature; sufficient bandwidth was not always available to permit reliably productive use) it never really took off. During the pandemic, with most people working remotely, once remote-access capacity issues for corporate and institutional networking infrastructures were resolved, the technology launched itself over Moore's chasm like Evel Knievel, and while some shakeout in the various market segments that comprise the remote collaboration tool space is probably inevitable, for the time being the risen tide has lifted nearly all boats.

- Few organizations failed to see some of their sluggish delivery processes turbo-charged, with most logging notable successes in cycle time reductions (De Smet *et al*, 2020; Gelles, 2020). While some of these are clearly the result of redirecting resources or priorities toward urgent matters, it is possible that some residual process-efficiency innovation will percolate to other sluggish areas or in general. In two particular industries (vaccine research in both big pharma and government agencies, and vendors of the collaboration tools discussed in the point above) we saw this phenomenon in clear and sharp relief, to the astonishment even of industry professionals in these and adjacent segments.

- Online learning has historically been a slow-developing industry. Despite the growth in amateur content on YouTube and like platforms, and availability of university courses online in recent years, in two important segments (elementary and secondary school age children, and adult professional learners) it has been a long, gentle growth curve. COVID-19 changed the slope of that curve almost overnight (Dhawan, 2020; Hess, 2020; Li & Lalani, 2020).

- Official meetings (e.g., government, institutional governance, corporate leadership, shareholders, graduation ceremonies, academic and professional conferences, etc.) were never held online. Now, they are being held online (Carman, 2020; Fleming, 2020; Hess, 2020; Olena, 2020; Price, 2020; Trentmann, 2020; Nietzel, 2021). While this transformation certainly was not overnight, the fact that it happened at all was entirely due to the crisis that was created.

- The transition from cash-based to cashless commerce, while long espoused as the future, has been slow and sporadic and has varied from economy to economy. COVID-19 has essentially forced most retail businesses to adopt an entirely cashless model in their brick-and-mortar stores, and has also driven more of their business online, where cashless is the only option (Holzhauer, 2020; Lorinc, 2020; Poon, 2020; Torry, 2021).

Admittedly, the burning platform metaphor does not describe the coronavirus state of affairs fully, as the issue is less about finding the sense of urgency to jump and more about figuring out how to put out the fire. Nonetheless, in terms of demonstrating how a crisis, real or potential, or even the urgency engendered thereby can provoke innovation, energy, and the will to change, the analogy holds.

## 5. People Resist (Even Beneficial) Change Less When They Are Part of It

While this is a fairly obvious rule of thumb, it is still widely ignored in organizations. Rather than letting their people know they are planning to bake a cake, asking for cake preferences, and keeping people apprised of progress, most organizations will bake a cake and present it to their employees, only to find out that said employees do not like cake, do not like that type of cake, or would rather have had pie.

Simply put, people like it more when change *happens with* them, rather than when it is *done to* them.

Hence, during COVID-19, the resistance to mandated mask-wearing and physical-distancing could have been predicted. Similarly, the arbitrary closures of certain types of businesses, especially when other, not materially dissimilar types of businesses, schools, etc., could remain open, has been, unsurprisingly, met with sharp rebuke in some quarters.

In a less pointed example, soft resistance to video sharing in online meetings (Bailenson, 2021; Castelli & Sarvary, 2021), a clearly beneficial practice that results in more effective such experiences, appears to be some form of protest, although it seems misdirected at co-workers, educators, or collaborators trying to promote it.

## 6. People Have a Predisposition for Fixing Problems Over Preventing Them

Similar to needing a crisis in order to be galvanized into action, people also have a tendency toward waiting until something is broken, and then fixing it, instead of preventing the breakage in the first place. An executive of my past acquaintance, infamously, expressed a preference for having "firefighters and streetfighters" on her team, articulating just the preference described above; she had no interest in problem management or preventive maintenance, practices lacking the drama and attention that could presumably lead to advancement, though in her case the strategy did not work, and she eventually left the company. The authors of the CMM framework for organizational process maturity (Paulk *et al*, 1994) position this kind of corporate ethos under level 1, the lowest level of maturity, and frame it as a culture dominated by individual heroics rather than collective enterprise.

In the case of COVID-19, there is ample evidence (Gates, 2015; Event 201, 2019) that sufficient predictive foreknowledge existed that should have galvanized governments, NGOs, and private interests into preparedness and response planning and preventive and curative medicine development. Instead, they all did nothing. Fixing the problem, assuredly, will be more dramatic; it will also be far more costly, on many levels.

A similar situation exists with climate change. In this case, however, the likelihood that waiting for a crisis will doom the planet is arguably greater. To many experts, the crisis is already here, we may already have waited too long to act, and fixing the problem may not actually be an option.

As a corollary to the fixing-over-preventing preference, crises often bring pre-existing problems into sharper relief; that is, these prior problems may have been acknowledged, actions taken, solutions attempted, etc., but the problems are still there, and the crisis may be making them worse, or they may be making the crisis worse. The problems may be intractable, even "wicked" (Churchman, 1967; Rittel & Webber, 1973); they may be politically fraught; they may be polarizing. For these problems, the crisis may or may not galvanize people into action to solve them – often they are no more solvable now – it merely brings the spotlight, briefly. Some such problems the coronavirus has highlighted include:

- the crisis in elder care, especially in institutional long-term care facilities (Aronson, 2020; The Economist, 2020; Abrams, 2021; Ireland & Kalata, 2021);
- the lack of universal access to basic health care (Ducarme, 2020; Bambra *et al*, 2020; Blumenthal *et al*, 2020);
- the opioid addiction crisis (Kamp & Campo-Flores, 2020; Bauman & Lopez, 2021; Niles *et al*, 2021);
- the mental health crisis (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020; Xiong *et al*, 2020);
- the precarious lot of indigenous people (Hansen, 2020; Hillier *et al*, 2020; Goha *et al*, 2021);
- the untenable nature of the 'gig economy' (Conger *et al*, 2020; Jeon & Ostrovsky, 2020; Moulds, 2020; Warsh, 2021);
- the plight of lower-income segments of the population, and the 'ghettoization' thereof, especially in urban settings (Enriquez *et al*, 2020; Josephson *et al*, 2021; Whitehead & Taylor-Robinson, 2021);
- the lack of universal access to broadband connectivity (Broom, 2020; Stewart, 2020; Early, 2021); and
- our culture of information addiction and a widespread inability to be sufficiently skeptical or discerning about online information, particularly from unverified sources (Chen, 2020; Freckelton, 2020; Hartley et al, 2020; Pazzanese, 2020; Rutjens et al, 2021).

## 7. Crisis Is a Crucible of Creativity

Nothing gets the creative juices flowing like having your world turned upside-down. While some creative types just threw in the towel, others rose above the calamity, even turning it to modest advantage. Some examples include:

- Some writers, musicians, artists, etc., have used the downtime and quiet isolation to create new works (Brice-Saddler, 2020; Garcia, 2020; Hansika & Kaufman, 2020; Jeannotte, 2021).
- Performers whose livelihood depends in large part on the revenues from live performance have begun livestreaming content in a wide range of formats from smartphone-to-Instagram snippets to slightly wobbily-synchronized videochat ensemble pieces to full concert-quality broadcasts (Kominers, 2020; Millman, 2020; Bruner, 2021).
- Music platforms have an ephemeral nature – and fleeting currency – about them. Many artists, during the pandemic, have doubled down on their support for one such platform, Bandcamp, and the platform has rewarded their loyalty with occasional Fridays where it takes no cut from purchases made there, allowing all the revenues to flow to the artists (Roberts, 2020).
- Restaurants and bars derive a portion of their revenue from the markup on alcohol. During the more restrictive periods, they have been branching out as bottle shops, reselling the same alcohol, at a smaller markup, for take-out (Waters, 2020; Bueckert, 2021; Cooper, 2021).
- Anyone with a sewing machine and modest skills quickly went into the mask-making business (Whalen, 2020; Dawkins, 2021; Garone, 2021). Designers made more fashionable or whimsical variants at higher price points.
- Anyone with a 3D printer and modest skills went into the business of making face shields (Buckner, 2020; Celik *et al*, 2020).
- Any engineer was potentially designing a less complicated ventilator and – in another burning platform driven moment – manufacturers were rapidly retooling unrelated manufacturing lines to accommodate their manufacture (Criddle, 2020; Somers, 2020; Code Life Challenge, 2020).

## 8. In Change There Is Opportunity

In the spirit of 'one door closes and another one opens', change inevitably creates new opportunities without any intentionality whatsoever. So, while not necessarily creative, some activities during the crisis were opportunistic, *carpe diem* manifestations of stepping through said open door. Such activities included:

- With less traffic, and in order to foster healthy physical activity with diminished risk, many cities opted for car-free or pedestrian-priority zones, street closures, and expanded bicycle lanes (Connolly, 2020; Katz, 2020; Perry, 2020; Iassinovskaia, 2021).
- So as to allow for more diner capacity while distanced, many cities implemented curbside dining zones (Sowder, 2020; Marks, 2021; Mason, 2021).
- Online retail has surged; online retail platforms have thrived (CP, 2020; Perez, 2020; UNCTAD, 2020; Gramling *et al*, 2021; Kapner, 2021; Verdon, 2021).
- Online retail has surged; the demand for local shipping and delivery services, courier services, and logistical services has increased, even relative to the prior increases due to the growth of Amazon and the comparatively modest efforts of everyone trying to compete with them (Escudero *et al*, 2020; Hermann, 2020; Twinn *et al*, 2020).
- Bicycle sales have spiked (Bernhard, 2020; Goldbaum, 2020; Fuller *et al*, 2021; Mazerolle, 2021).

- With everyone at home and lonely, pet adoptions have soared (CBC News, 2020; Ho *et al*, 2021; Levenson, 2021).
- With everyone at home, bored, and with the time to be critical of their living environments, home renovation activity, particularly interior work, has increased dramatically (Lee-Shanok, 2020; Olick, 2020).
- With less automobile traffic early in the pandemic, road construction projects kicked into overdrive; once traffic resumed, gridlock ensued (Berman, 2020; Davies, 2020; O'Neil, 2020).

## 9. Crisis Exacerbates Polarization

While the optimistic view of humanity is that we entertain and include a variety of diverse perspectives, the reality is more that we align ourselves along a number of ideological continua, and regardless of the number of them, we feel confident of the position we occupy along each line.

Increasingly, that alignment is closer and closer to one or the other extreme (see Veroni, 2014), and, in our engagement with and relationship to others, we look to placing them very near to us, or very far from us; the more simplistic or dichotomous the scale we use to frame the relationship, the better.

This is, obviously, not a healthy state of affairs, and, in recent years, we have seen the ill effects demonstrated dramatically, violently, and publicly.

Some of the more familiar axes of polarization are these:

- Race (chiefly, the domestically or regionally predominant race vs. any other)
- Religion (chiefly, the domestically or regionally predominant religion vs. any other)
- Political ideology (right vs. left)
- More government vs. less government (or, in the extreme, authoritarianism vs. autonomy)
- Federal mandate vs. provincial/state mandate
- Social health vs. economic health
- Environmental health vs. economic health
- Science vs. populism
- Rural vs. urban sensibilities

COVID-19 has brought all these continua into focus, amplified them, fomented conflict around them, and brought all their negative effects to the fore (Diaz & Mountz, 2020; Packer, 2020; Rothwell & Makridis, 2020). It is not the first crisis to do so, but given its global swath and its unprecedented impact, its power to exacerbate polarization has been dramatic. Here, again, we find the "we're all in this together" platitudes littering the side of a very bumpy road.

## 10. Third Places Are Important

While not an obvious contributor to our relation to change, in fact our identity as human beings is rooted in our ability to claim and occupy our 'third places'.

While the naming of the concept is relatively recent (Oldenburg, 1989; see also Hitt *et al*, 1990; Kunstler, 1993; Putnam, 2000), the existence of third places is as old as human civilization. Neither home nor work, third places define our social and communal identities and are central to our development and sustainment as human beings. Without them, we suffer, fall prey to societal ills, and lose our sense of our social selves.

While the criticisms these writers offer up are more aligned to Jacobs (1961) and, hence, target the automobile culture, particularly in North America, as the chief cause for the diminished

presence and beneficial effects of third places, we can see the same pattern evident in the effects of COVID-19.

We clearly saw resistance and negative reaction to closures and impatience for reopening of key third places – gyms, recreation centres, rinks, pools, libraries, barbershops, hair and nail salons, restaurants, cafés, bars, cinemas, theatres, art galleries, concert halls, places of worship, and even casinos and malls. At the same time, those third places that were not closed – parks, trails, drive-in theatres, etc. – saw a significant uptick in usage, almost or actually to the point of forcing their closure as well, due to overcrowding. While the recognition of all these entities specifically as third places has been far from widespread, it has been made clear to those acquainted with the concept that the idea of third places and the arguments for their importance were solid to begin with, and the coronavirus simply gave them overdue credence.

COVID-19 provided two additional illuminations about third places. First, in recent years the notion has been presented (Turkle, 2011) that the online analogues of third places – social media – have to some degree supplanted the physical entities. While this may be true to a degree, the more likely conclusion to draw is that online third places *abet* physical third places rather than *replace* them – they are an extension of, rather than an adequate substitute for, the actual places.

The second coronavirus revelation here is of the emerging role of the workplace – a traditional second place – as a kind of proxy third place, especially among young urban professionals whose tiny living spaces offer little more than a place to crash. With a hipper aesthetic and a casual vibe, it is easy to see how the progressive modern workplace has come to be part of the social enclave that third places typically define and, hence, why working from home and staying there most of the time could have social repercussions, especially for younger people.

**Implications and Conclusion**

This paper does not attempt to laud the pandemic for its unwitting foregounding of undervalued but fundamentally ironclad tenets. Nonetheless, in the spirit of taking value from a catastrophe, we should mine what revelations do inhere there.

In this respect, though, if we accept some measure of new empirical support for the validity of the preceding ten statements, implications with regard to understanding and stewarding change in organizations should emerge. Below, I offer some for consideration:

- If simple models of human organizations, especially models of change in organizations, seem inadequate in the face of the change that is at hand, regardless of its catalyst, perhaps that is because the organizational reality is complex and simple models are inadequate to describe it. Consider more open, observational, flexible, adaptive, and autopoietic frameworks.

- In the face of change, people should not be expected to behave altruistically; instead, they will more likely behave selfishly. Benefit claims, therefore, should always primarily target the individual (answering "what's in it for me?" or "what's in it for my tribe?") before the broader collective ("how can this help others?" or "how can this help everyone?").

- The notion of a resilient 'end state' resulting from bounded, linear, unidirectional organizational change is misguided. People and organizations evolve, multifariously and continuously.

- Especially present and relevant crises can shock us into action around changes where there was hitherto collective inertia, bring creativity to the fore in devising new alternatives, feed our innate desire to fix problems, and open opportunities for options previously unavailable or undiscovered. Better approaches to visualizing potential crises to the same effect, possibly as an extension of the established technique of

scenario planning (Wack, 1985a/b; Schwartz, 1996; van der Heijden, 1996), is an area where more research attention should be directed.

- People should be involved in the change of which they are a part by being welcomed into the conversation. At the very least, they should be informed, early and often; better, they should be brought into the inner circle of decision-making by being shown the fruits of the process while it is going on, rather than after it is complete. People should be allowed to evaluate options and provide input. Management by secrecy has been the norm in organizations since there have been organizations; however, the practice's sell-by date is long past, so it needs to be thrown out.

- That change is polarizing should be acknowledged. Open and free exchange of views should be sought, but with the ultimate goal being a shared, consensual middle ground, not further polarization.

- People process change in their own way, and at their own pace. They do it at work, and they do it at home; also, crucially, they do it in their third places. It is important not to lose sight of the importance of third places, for this and many other reasons.

The above recommendations, clearly, do not cohere into an overarching process for 'change management'; first, because notions of a 'process' for change, or of 'managing' change, in human enterprises, communities, and organizations, are flawed at first principles (Falconer, 2002); second, because change is an emergent concept, and applying heuristics to it are bound to fail (*ibid.*); and third, because the above are but fragmentary revelations of evolving phenomena, and the evidence that supports them today may be both transient and evanescent. Depending on when this paper is being read, COVID-19 will either continue to be a troublesome fact of life or it will be a distant, unpleasant memory. Regardless, it is hoped that we have learned a few things from it, as not to do so would make all the turmoil we have endured valueless. This paper touches only on a particular aspect; while it optimistically hopes for some positive outcomes in its domain of interest, it also hopes for similar papers that attempt to identify other lessons we all should be learning.

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