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July 2020



*Transformative Communities:  
Passionately Committed to Learning*

## Transformative Communities: Passionately Committed to Learning

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*“There is an angel that bends over and whispers ‘Grow, Grow.’” (Talmud)*

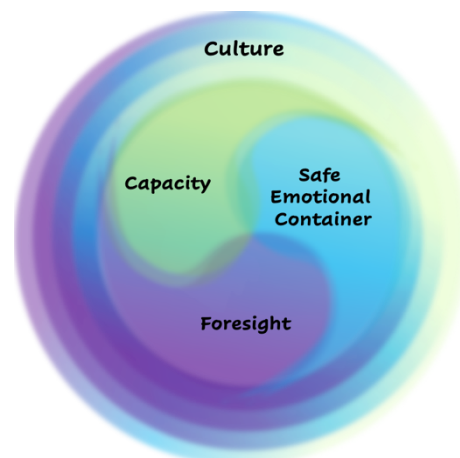
In the history of human culture, from the Talmud’s ancient instruction to grow to the contemporary concept of learning communities, we see the consistent mandate for learning and growth. Human beings are by nature inquisitive, organizing, and seeking creatures. We can place the concerns of contemporary religious communities in this context and discuss how they are both Learning and Transformative communities. Learning communities encompass a broad spectrum of educational, business, cultural, and other institutions in contemporary society. The term “transformative community” is more commonly associated with religious communities.

### Learning Communities

Learning communities provide a space and a structure for people to align around a shared goal. Effective communities are both aspirational and practical. They connect people, organizations, and systems that are eager to learn and work across boundaries while simultaneously holding members to a common agenda, metrics, and outcomes. These communities enable participants to share results and learn from each other, thereby improving their ability to achieve rapid yet significant progress. (<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/collective-change/key-concepts/learning-communities/>).

Learning communities create an influential culture that has three essential elements: emotional safety, foresight, and capacity development. Daniel Christian Wahl, in his book *Designing Regenerative Cultures*, states: “Creative problem-solving in a regenerative culture is not only about finding the answer to current needs but also helping to ask better questions” (Wahl 62). The pursuit of innovative concepts becomes woven into a learning quilt of deep reflection, generative ideas, and practical solutions. For this to transpire, it is vital to align cultural norms, institutional behaviors, and expectations to manifest the structure of a learning organization. The graphic below shows the integration of these essential elements.

*Four Pieces critical to the learning organization*



### Transformative Communities

The by-product of being a learning community is the consistent development of new competencies and action-oriented approaches. It leads to the establishment of a flexible and adaptive organization. Thus, in our context, learning communities must become transformative communities. Transformative Communities live by the Talmudic precept of “grow, grow grow.” They foster a pioneer spirit through establishing an internal culture of learning and ongoing transformation.

Communities that engage in a continuous discernment process become mediums of God's co-creative process. These attitudinal anchors create underpinnings which direct their collective energy toward society's renewal. They have an energetic thirst for learning that fosters a synergy for creative imagination that leads to action.

The speed of such societal disruptions as the pandemic, social unrest, technology, etc. continually raise new questions, social concerns, and opportunities to explore new models. Religious communities today must ask these questions:

How can we become transformative agents in our current culture and context?  
How can we embrace God's invitation for change in our time of the pandemic, social unrest, and economic disparity?

The reflective exploration of these questions opens them to God's call to become representatives of transformative change. The word "transformation" is not a theoretical construct, but rather an active component within the organization. It is not wishful thinking; it is an imperative.

The significance of an evolving renewing organization is crucial in our world, which has no simple solutions to complex issues. The issues currently surfacing have been festering under the surface for decades. Thomas Friedman, an internationally recognized author, reporter and columnist on society social issues and emerging trends, comments in his May 30, 2020, *New York Times* editorial:

And we're the ones who made it that way with our own hands. Just look around. Over the past 20 years, we've been steadily removing man-

made and natural buffers, redundancies, regulations and norms that provide resilience and protection when big systems — be they ecological, geopolitical, or financial — get stressed. We've been recklessly removing these buffers out of an obsession with short-term efficiency and growth, or without thinking at all. At the same time, we've been behaving in extreme ways — pushing against, and breaching, common-sense political, financial, and planetary boundaries.

Friedman reaffirms the importance of having an adaptable organizational culture to explore and take the long view regarding these issues. He verifies the vital significance of Transformative Communities being life-long Learning Communities collectively searching and exploring new ideas. This zeal stimulates the imagination to seek innovative solutions.

Transformative Communities are living in a social environment that summons us to co-create with God. Illia Delio, who specializes in the intersection of science and theology, states, "the whole Creation, beginning with the Big Bang, is Incarnation. Evolution is the process of unfolding life, from matter to spirit.... The God of evolution is the God of adventure, a God who loves to do new things and is always new" (O'Leary 21). These words are the foundation of a transformative learning community to co-create with God the world ever new.

Critical Considerations and Reflections  
Historical moments of significant change that create social disruptions place every organization in the cauldron of fire. The events of the past few months of 2020 have ripped open the fiber of society's soul and

exposed societal wounds and scars that seek collective healing. This crisis has called on every entity to reflect on how it has contributed to the problem. Groups are induced to explore how their relationships are oppressive and to formulate a change strategy. To better understand this, it is helpful to examine the critical components of a learning and/or transforming organizational culture: Safe Emotional Container; Foresight; Capacity.

### **Safe Emotional Container**

For a group to enter this transformative space, a safe emotional container is essential. For the group, psychological safety is vital to talk about their feelings, deal with conflict, and move forward together.

For an organization to create emotional safety, nurturing the culture of trust and openness is a necessity. These values, behaviors, and norms are vital for a group's ability to feel safe, Edgar Schein, an expert on organizational culture, offers a beginning strategy: "If you want to understand an organization's culture, go to a meeting. Who speaks and who does not, who is listened to, and who is not, which issues are addressed directly and which ignored or addressed by innuendo are powerful clues to how an organization actually functions" ( Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, Betty Sue Flowers) (48).

People who feel personally safe open their hearts to a healthy dialogue and seeking solutions. The safety of the group's container is essential to handling healthy disagreements and conflict. According to John Paul Lederach, a professor, and leader in the areas of conflict resolution and mediation, "Our language talks about a journey. In conflict more than any other human experience, we see ourselves

and others in new and profound ways, and we seek to restore truth and love in ourselves" (Lederach 14).

Learning and growth are the heart of any transformative organization. The members must feel safe for them to risk and explore. If the cultural climate leads to people feeling insecure, then the organization becomes stagnant and misses new opportunities. Thus the culture that fosters organizational renewal nurtures the appetite to explore new ideas and services while challenging the existing reality.

Current and future organizations must develop a disciplined path toward becoming learning organizations. There is a tendency to seek release from fearful emotions by choosing immediate solutions which can create comfort, yet often block creativity. Daniell Susskind, in his book *A World Without Work*, emphasizes the need for continual learning, "In that sense embracing lifelong learning is a way of insuring ourselves against the unknowable demands that the working world of the future might make of us"(161).

Organizations today are committed to emotional safety as one of their highest priorities. This principle is imperative to embrace the emerging questions and competing values that shock their existing framework. These unsettling emerging issues confront existing mental models, services, and internal structures. The members thus feel vulnerable and insecure and experience a sense of disillusionment. A compassionate presence of listening, honest communication, and empathy is crucial to navigating this path. These qualities allow individuals and groups to be open to their essence. Conversations tend to have intense emotional swings

ranging from enthusiasm and excitement to anger and energetic disagreement. The gift of deep respect and reverence of the other is at the core of their being in fostering a safe emotional container.

Transformative Communities recognize that a safe emotional container creates a community able to be flexible and adaptable to the shifting winds of change. This gift of safety allows each person to reach their fullest potential while moving the shared vision forward. Thus the organization intensifies its foresight for being agile and creative in a changing paradigm.

Research has shown that a group can achieve its purpose when members feel safe and secure. The collective security is always three dimensional: the listener, the people sharing, and the group responding. Marc Brackett, the Director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, in *Permission to Feel*, quotes Plato: "All learning has an emotional component" (27). When individuals and groups feel scorned, they tend to engage in adaptive behavior. If this becomes the norm, it leads to the erosion of the collective mission and services. For any organization to be successful both within and without, people need to have the permission to feel. A safe container is a place that nurtures and develops through honesty and transparency.

A transformative community must ask and answer three crucial questions to develop an emotionally safe culture:

- Does the organization's culture foster honesty and transparency in the exploration of diverse opinions, innovative approaches, and values?
- Does the organization recognize healthy conflict as a means of learning and

expanding the group beyond current prejudices and biases?

- Does the organization foster both intergenerational and intercultural understanding?

How the group addresses these questions determines whether or not the organization is a culturally safe emotional container. The answers open the door to an organization's developing into or growing as a regenerative, learning, and mission-driven group.

### **Foresight**

Foresight is a regenerating capacity that allows the organization to keep one eye on current reality and the other on an emergent future. E.O Wilson, known for his work in biology and evolutionary/social behavior, comments that "We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely" (Wahl 92). In spiritual terms, foresight is participating in God's co-creative process to expand one's horizons. It is an unfolding organic rather than a static pilgrimage to achieving the collective vision.

The critical gift of foresight is the ability to envision or dream. John Paul Lederach says in his book *reconcile* that people and organizations with foresight "tackle dreaming by reading the signs and the time and then predicting where we will be in the future. In simple words, they look at what is and suggest what will be, based on those realities"(22).

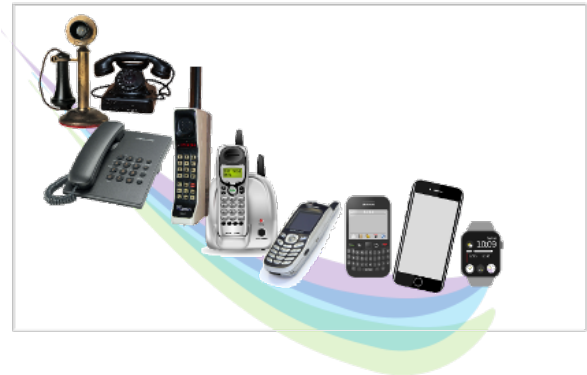
An organization that is a Learning Organization fosters a pioneering attitude that can imagine a world not yet born. The tendency is to see foresight as an executive

decision. However, every individual member must believe and act with an inventor's spirit. Learning organizations are committed to a regenerative process at every level of the organization. Their cultural ethos expects to seek professional and organizational growth.

There are three essential components of developing organizational foresight: questioning, dreaming, and acting. Hal Gregerson, the Executive Director of the MIT Leadership Center, finds inspirational the words of Elie Wiesel, a survivor who alerted the world to the horrors of the Holocaust, "In the word question, there is a beautiful word – quest. I love that word." (Gregerson 1). The latest social challenges forced upon us by the current COVID-19 pandemic have forced us to start a new quest to re-imagine the future. We are already experiencing such catalysts as working at home, using telemedicine, and online learning. All of these experiences establish new questions that form the quest. The exploration of their meaning is the foundation of a vision that leads to taking the first steps. The gift of foresight enables people to see flashes of a new concept or innovation and to create meaning and a shared commitment toward action.

The telephone is an excellent example of a foresighted quest. Initially, the phone was hanging on the wall; then, it sat on the table, and now it is held in hand. Each one of these transitions gave people greater freedom to communicate with friends, families, and others. People's imagination and creativity began a quest of what-if which led to more innovative uses for the phone. The graphic below depicts the movement. Each innovation created new options that moved the concept of merely a phone that enabled two-way communication to a platform with a plethora of options. The phone expanded it

uses with each new generation of phone. Every adaptation disrupted the current model and altered the purpose and importance of the phone in daily life. The phone has become an interconnected resource for purchasing, healthcare, social bonding, and other choices.



For an organization to have foresight, it needs to ask three vital questions:

- Does the cultural environment foster a commitment to questioning, challenging, and exploring emerging trends that could impact us both in the present and future?
- Does the organization nurture foresight across every sector of the organization, from services to operations to fiscal viability?
- Does the organization nurture risk-taking, or does it fail to seek new opportunities?

### **Capacity Building**

In this historical time of disruption and change, it behooves the organization to seek new opportunities. It will mean developing and nurturing increased competencies. Always cultivating new skills is vital to remaining agile and adaptable. The path forward is through a passionate exploration of new mental frameworks, skills, and strategies.

Every aspect of the organization must be committed to ongoing educational development. It means that both the organization and individual need to have a growth plan with embedded accountability. Leadership must have a zeal to create an infrastructure that fosters both opportunity and responsibility for improvement.

The organizational structure must promote cross (intra)-organizational learning. It must establish processes to leverage the creativity and imagination of best practices throughout the organization. It must also recognize the advantage of creating cross-functional teams. These teams challenge members to transcend their silos and foster collaboration. Also, it must encourage resource development and mentoring that strengthen services and mission success.

One of the givens of this type of culture is the acceptance of failure because foresight does not always guarantee success. It is necessary to see disappointment as a learning opportunity. Often individuals and groups fall into the cycle of despair, end of the world thinking, and other emotional states that limit their capacity to adapt. The wisdom gained through a letdown has the potential to create shared knowledge. Thus the tolerance of failure and its subsequent learning process opens the door for exploring new opportunities. Often the seeds of a so-called failure create the window for a breakthrough.

Another trademark of capacity building is the recognition of the eco-system. The group recognizes their participation in a larger eco-system of relationships that offers insight and wisdom. Organizations can learn much from the knowledge of ancient wise people: "Indigenous worldviews around the planet share a

common perspective: the world is alive and meaningful, and our relationship with the rest of life is one of participation, communion, and co-creation" (Wahl,159). In other words, people have always recognized that we are on a collective journey of co-creation. It means leaving our cocoon and searching for wisdom, support, and collaborative relationships that regenerate our system and the larger world.

For example, one religious group envisioned establishing a social justice project that would involve its members. They created a committee with an idea for developing a specific activity. The committee struggled and kept believing that it was not on the right path. This angst led to developing a survey to understand the involvement of their sisters in Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) activities. The member's feedback was stunning, indicating that over 80% of the community actively engaged at some dimension of social justice service. Their commitment focused on advocacy, human trafficking, and the environment. The research demonstrated that a project was not going to invite their members and others into the critical work of JPIC. They changed course and created a strategic direction that led to hiring two staff. Their adjustment enabled them to acquire both the resources and platform to explore the emerging racism issue. The process was grounded in learning foresight and being adaptable. They were thus walking down a path from seeming failure to opportunity. This example speaks to the process of knowledge, perseverance, and adaptation.

For a group to have a capacity-building framework, it is crucial to focus on three critical questions:

- What are the new aspects of expertise and capacity we need to foster within us?
- What aspects of our culture do or do not support being a learning organization?
- What additional resources do we need to add, let go, and gather from outside partners to increase our expertise?

The three ingredients of emotional safety, foresight, and capacity building lead to a regenerative, transformative organization. When the organizational culture nurtures these elements, it leads to creativity and action. An organization that fosters a diverse, adaptable, and creative environment opens the window to foresight that, in turn, impacts the quality of society.

Organizational virtues which characterize the personal attributes of members and leaders of learning and transformative communities in an age of turbulence are illustrated in the graphic cloud below, as described in *See Sooner Act Faster* by George S. Day and Paul J.H. Schoemaker. These characteristics are the hallmark of a learning group and its leaders, as illustrated in the practical applications described above. They establish the foundation for the ongoing implementation of new ideas.



Emotional Safety, Foresight, and Capacity Building are the critical structural disciplines that must be infused into and live in an organization. These principles form the foundation for psychological safety. They affirm transparency seeking diverse opinions while declaring that conflict is normative. Research has shown that the groups that handle passionate differences with honesty and openness find the best ideas and solutions. They see conflict as the lubricant when treated with reverence and compassion. This level of dialogue and passionate reflection creates an ongoing transformative organization. The gift of emotional safety leads to foresight and capacity building that solves complex and challenging issues.

The active engagement with and application of these principles opens the path to co-create with God. As John Paul Lederach states in *reconcile*, "I believe in the God of history, the God of creation, the God of love and compassion, the God of immeasurable power" (135). Transformative communities are those which actively engage in the unfolding creative process. The mandate for a transformative community is to make those words real for a world hungering for hope-filled change. A group grounded in a vibrant culture that fosters continual learning, growth, and foresight becomes the living energy of transformative hope.



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*Graphics designed by Mary Wcisel, Graphic Designer for CommunityWorks., Inc*

### ***Transformative Communities Series: Passionately Committed to Learning***



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