Wave Rider

LEADERSHIP FOR HIGH PERFORMANCE

in a Self-Organizing World

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an excerpt from

Wave Rider:
Leadership for High Performance
in a Self-Organizing World

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Wave Riders are curious people possessed of an innate capacity to go with the flow, constantly seizing upon opportunity when others see no possibility, or even disaster. Their level of performance is consistently high, and projects are often completed in breathtakingly short periods of time, with a degree of excellence that may seem unbelievable. Not always, not in every instance—but with a regularity that sets them apart, but never alone. Together with their fellows, Wave Riders create the critical community bonds, essential for productive activity. And they bring a special gift—Leadership. Their passion and responsibility for a cause inspire others to make common cause. Not by domination and control, but through invitation and appreciation, the efforts of many coalesce as one.

Saying that Wave Riders go with the flow is not to say that they have a light regard for planning, logic, and hard work. In fact the Wave Rider may be a fanatic for planning, logical to a fault, and a total workaholic. But what sets them apart is that they also possess a clear understanding of the limitations of all three: planning, logic, and hard work. For them the Plan is the map and not the territory. Necessary, useful, but never to be confused with the facts on the ground, and certainly never to be given preeminence.

Likewise with logic. Good and useful for sure, but when the daily course of experience appears to behave in an illogical fashion, usually referred to as counterintuitive, the Wave Rider will under–stand that there are multiple "logics," and it may well be that the one employed is simply inappropriate to the situation. A classic case of this phenomenon comes from the world of physics at the point where quantum mechanics made its appearance. Traditional Newtonian physicists were logical to a fault, perceiving the elegant coherence in the cosmos to be an exquisite clockworks. However, as the world of subatomic physics became the object of study, the traditional logic faltered. And those who were crafting the emerg–ing quantum physics used the sense of illogic to advance their work. Werner Heisenberg, the originator of the Uncertainty Principle, is said to have remarked, "Your theory is crazy, but not crazy enough to be true."

On the subject of work—Wave Riders do indeed work very hard. They are often sticklers for detail and devote amazing amounts of time and energy to enterprises for which they have a genuine passion. When they care, they care deeply, and the effect of this caring is a devotion to their cause that others may find disturbing.

But there is another aspect to a Wave Rider's relation to work that many will find strange. On occasion, all of their busy *doing* simply stops. The task lists are put away, the goals and objectives are all placed on hold. The Wave Rider is content to be there in that present moment. An outside observer might legitimately con–clude that the Wave Rider has given up, but the truth is rather different. She or he has simply let go. Not to be confused with a

fatalistic withdrawal from life—this letting go has a very different quality. The commitment to the original passionate concern remains unshaken, and if anything, is deepened and intensified. Rather than fatalism, there is profound awareness and trust in the deep forces which drive toward completion and fulfillment. And of equal importance is a recognition that any "doing" in the sense of organizing, managing, forcing—will not only be ineffective, but may well be counterproductive.

Wave Riders may be found in all times and places. Some will be remembered as major historical characters, the names of others will never be recorded in the pages of history. Gandhi, for example, confounded the British Empire not only with his tireless efforts and articulate strategy (plans), but also, and perhaps more importantly, with his presence and capacity to simply be there in the present moment, apparently doing nothing. Dee Hock comes from a very different environment, the corporate world. As the founder of VISA International, Dee Hock surely *did* a lot, but he also well under–stood the need to let go and simply be there. Not the controlling/directing chief executive, but rather the appreciator of an evolving organic entity which has become one of the largest global corporations—and over which he had no control.

Wave Riders are not limited to global or corporate heros. The mother of a growing family, shepherding her brood toward adulthood, will ride the waves of her complex and confusing world—multi–tasking we call it. To be sure, she has plans and tasks in abundance, to–do lists without end. But at the end of the day, and indeed on every day, she will be remembered not so much for

what she did, which may be truly awesome, but rather for the power of her singular presence.

Wave Riders show up on the shop floor and the executive suite, athletic fields, and the halls of government. They appear at every level and station in life, but never are they to be confused with the great man version of The Leader, even though some may bear the most exalted of titles. The power of their presence comes from a very different place. It is not bestowed as a divine right, nor is it claimed in a decisive act of control. It is a power that comes from powerlessness and the full recognition that they will never be in control. They do not command; they invite. They do not envision themselves at the apex of a hierarchy but rather in a circle with their peers and colleagues. The source of their power comes from their own unique passion linked to responsibility which attracts others to join a common venture. A venture which is at once productive and personally fulfilling for those who care to join. Wave Riders are leaders who enable individuals and organizations to fulfill their potential—with distinction.

Needed: More Wave Riders

Wave Riders have been with us always, usually unnoticed, or if noticed then treated as a curious exception to the rule. And indeed it often seemed that they were playing by very different rules. There was doubtless a time when we could afford to smile sympathetically at the behavior of the Wave Riders in our midst. When good things happened (the difficult was handled with dispatch, and the impossible achieved with a little more time), we could scratch our heads and wonder at the fabulous run of luck which the Wave Rider obviously enjoyed. It would never occur to us that there

might actually be a method in their madness. In fact such thoughts *could not* occur to us if only because virtually all of our training and experience told us otherwise. Wave Riders were clearly the exception, and we all knew the proper way to do business, whatever that business might be. The critical point was to seize and maintain control in the manner of the Great Man Leader. Only then could good and useful things happen. Or so many of us thought.

The times have changed. The anomalous behavior of the Wave Rider holds a critical clue to new ways of surviving, and indeed thriving, in our chaotic world, enabling all of us to achieve levels of excellence and high performance previously unknown.

The search for high performance has typically been a major concern of businesses and other organizations in their quest for efficiency and effectiveness. However, the stakes have risen dramatically. Achieving optimum levels of human performance is no longer just an issue of organizational effectiveness, but now a matter of global survival. The list of threatening possibilities is virtually without end: climate change, nuclear disaster, pandemics of various sorts, to name a few. Any one of these, taken by itself, would constitute a real problem, but everything is coming together in a dizzying maelstrom of complex interaction. Even just thinking about all of this is sufficient to produce the maximum headache. The good news is that for the past several millennia, human beings have successfully negotiated the terrain. Not always perfectly, and perhaps less than elegantly, but so far we have made it. However, more than a few disturbing signs indicate that our good luck may be about to change, signs which appear as organizational dysfunction, and individual fatigue and disorientation.

The simple fact of the matter is that our institutions, major and minor, are stretched to the breaking point. Even with the best efforts in the world, the stuff accumulating in the Global Inbox is getting out of hand. The impact on our individual lives is equally obvious and severe. Stress, breakdown, alienation, exhaustion— we know them all. Rather like the mad Queen in Alice and Wonderland, we are discovering that the faster we go, the "behinder" we get.

Doubtless the end is not yet, and for sure we have a few more tricks up our sleeves. However, the time may well have come when the consideration of alternatives would be useful. Typically, we have attempted to deal with our multiple dilemmas by trying harder and harder to do more and more of what we have always done. If our organizations lack purpose and power, it is obviously time to reorganize—and reorganize again. And when events show every indication of spinning into oblivion, we redouble our efforts to assert, or regain, control—layering controllers upon controllers upon controls. I propose that it is not that we are doing something wrong, but rather that we are doing the wrong thing. Or put some-what differently: Going the way we are going we are not likely to reach our destination. It is time for a change of course.

The argument of the book is that we must now recognize that we, our organizations, as indeed the entire cosmos—are all self-organizing systems. Not just a little bit, not just in some special part, but from beginning to end, top to bottom. It is all self-organization. The implications of this recognition, should it prove to be valid, are twofold (at least). First, a large part of what we currently devote a good deal of time and energy to—organizing

things—is wasted effort, for our systems, left to their own devices, will take care of that business pretty much all by themselves. Second, our efforts at organization and control are not only of questionable value, but also destructive. By imposing our view of organization on a self–organizing system we essentially throw a spanner in the works, thereby reducing organizational function and our own levels of performance.

Stated in more positive terms, were we to recognize, and fully appreciate, the power of self–organization we could be relieved of an enormous task, freeing time and energy for the many other pressing issues of our day. Even better, we might learn how to leverage the power of self–organization for our benefit, thereby achieving levels of performance which presently lie beyond our wildest dreams. We will ride this primordial power, compensating for our own powerlessness. Wave Riders for sure.

Secret of the Wave Rider

The Wave Rider's secret is a deep awareness of the fundamental self–organizing nature of our world. This awareness may be largely intuitive or very conscious, but the net effect is the capacity to align oneself and one's work with the primal force of self–organization, thereby leveraging its enormous power. Concurrently, the Wave Rider is keenly aware of the limitations of his or her own powers, particularly the power of control. Recognizing the mind–boggling complexity of the chaordic forces at play (thank you, Dee Hock) the Wave Rider understands that total control, at least of the sort that many seem to seek, is but a fond hope, verging on the delusional.

The image of the Wave Rider comes from the world of surfing, providing a vivid picture of the interrelationship of human beings

and the self–organizing world. To see the point, we must set the scene as a surfer might experience it. At the simplest level there is a lot of ocean, more than a few waves, and a very small board—with the beach lying ahead. The objective is quite simple. Ride the wave on the board until you reach the beach. Although there may be many mis–steps, mishaps, and false starts along the way, when The Wave comes it can be the experience of a lifetime.

For somebody sitting on the beach, particularly a non–surfer such as myself, the setting looks like simplicity itself—waves, board, beach, and sky. An experienced surfer will see all this rather differ–ently, beginning with the wave(s).

The elegant simplicity of the forming wave is a monster of complexity with quite a history. For a West Coaster (U.S.) the story begins in the vastness of the Pacific. A gentle wind ruffles an other–wise smooth surface and a wavelet is born. As more and different winds transverse the surface, wavelets coalesce in a complex process of cancellation and amplification. And curiously enough the water itself hardly moves, it is only the force passing through, modified by intervening islands and continents. And so the form–ing wave has a history which vastly exceeds the time from the first puff of wind. The movement of tectonic plates and violent volcanic events from millennia past also make their mark.

When the wave force swells the waters off the California coast, local powers and conditions add their imprint to the complex stew. Bottom types of differing sorts shift and form the surfacing wave until it rises from the surrounding sea and comes into the view of the waiting surfer. Simple on the surface, but containing a churning mammoth of complex, interacting forces with a very long history.

When the instant arrives that rider, wave, and board unite—all of the history, complexity, skill, surging power, and random chaos coalesce in a mindless moment of sheer exhilaration. Speeding down and across the broad face of the advancing wave with the curl steaming spray just behind and above—the rider, board, and wave are one in a timeless moment. Sooner or later that moment comes to an end, as all things do in this life. But for that moment an image of high performance is accelerated by the leveraged power of an enor–mous self–organizing system, otherwise known as the Pacific Ocean.

What can we learn from the surfer that may assist us in our own efforts to ride the waves of our time with excellence, manifest–ing true high performance? The two primary lessons may appear largely negative but no less important. First, if we ever thought that the road forward might be viewed solely as a rational project which we might think our way into, we clearly have a second thought coming. The level of random complexity, to say nothing of chaos, confusion, and conflict is more than sufficient to blow the superior mind. We simply can't think that sort of stuff, and certainly not to the point where we could identify, isolate, analyze, and understand the myriad critical elements.

This does not mean, of course, that good, hardheaded fact gath–ering, analysis, and "intentioning" (used to be called Planning) are irrelevant. Such efforts have their place, but they need to be kept in their place. All of that is, and remains, a map of the territory, never to be confused with the reality of the wave face and the incredible timeless moment of hanging out there.

The second lesson relates to the subject of control. Stated bluntly, any surfer who ever thinks, even for an instant, that he or

she is in charge of the wave, is in for a profound shock, delivered in a most memorable way. Assuming, of course, that there is any memory left to capture the moment.

And yet perfect rides on perfect waves do take place—despite the mind–numbing complexity of the moment, and the ultimate lack of control. It might appear to be dumb luck, but if so, the luck is not randomly distributed. Very clearly, some surfers "really get it" and others do not do so well. Obviously technique and experience play a significant part, but when the ride begins, there is no time to run through the checklist of the 42 critical points for a great ride. Once on the wave face and the descent begins—the rules have definitely changed. In the instant technique and experience are included but also radically transcended.

The metaphor of the Wave Rider, like all metaphors, has its limitations. I am hopeful, however, that it will serve to carry us into the world of self–organizing systems not as helpless pieces of flotsam and jetsam tossed about in a chaotic world, but rather as conscious and sensate human beings capable of bringing the human adventure to interesting and fulfilling conclusions.

The fundamental limitation of the Wave Rider image is that it may take us back into the troubled waters of rampant individualism, and the notion that leadership for high performance is the private preserve of The Great Man. But the solo rider coursing down the face of a giant wave, the Mavericks[1] for example, is but a moment in time. And behind and ahead of this

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1 The Mavericks are a magnificent set of waves that appear periodically off the coast of California. And when the surf is up surfers from around the world gather for the rides of their lives, with thousands of spectators cheering them on from the beach.

moment lie innumerable rides by countless individuals over time. Surfing is a community activity, and each individual who stands for the moment in splendid isolation on the wave face is supported by the skills and enthusiasm of thousands of colleagues. It is true. One person surfs alone, expressing his passion for the ride and taking full responsibility for the consequences. But it is only a moment, and a shared moment at that. Fellow surfers share the wave face, and others will follow on succeeding waves.

The big secret is that we are all Wave Riders, but some do better than others. As long as human beings have inhabited Planet Earth, we have existed in a self-organizing world. Quite probably the majority are simply unconscious of this fact, and their adjustment to the forces of self-organization are equally unconscious. Others are unwilling Wave Riders, who take deep umbrage at the uncontrollable forces at play, seeking their defeat and claiming to be in charge. This effort may appear successful in the short term, but ultimately the powerful waves of our world pass on by undiminished, leaving those who thought they were in charge looking a little silly. There have also been more than a few who truly understood the situation, if only intuitively, and learned to ride the waves to their benefit and to the benefit of their fellow human beings. We are all Wave Riders, and the purpose of this book is to enable each one of us to become intentionally and competently what we already are—riders on the waves.

Invitation to an Experiment

I recognize that the propositions stated above represent somewhat of a departure from the conventional ways of viewing organizations and our place in them. Therefore I have no hope or expectation that these propositions will be easily or quickly accepted. In fact, doing so would be counterproductive. There is much to think about, rigorously examine, and test before anything approaching proof can be claimed. Therefore, you are invited to join an experiment, which in fact (at least as far as I am concerned) is already under way.

The experiment comes in two phases, the first part began some 21 years ago with the creation of Open Space Technology (OST)[2], which as you may know is credited to my account. I believe that credit to be largely undeserved as I rather stumbled into OST, but telling that story must wait until later in the book.

OST, for those unfamiliar with the approach, is simplicity itself. Groups of people sharing a common concern for a complex issue are invited to sit in a circle, identify the relevant subissues by posting them on a bulletin board, work out the time and space arrangements for their discussions in a marketplace setting—and then go to work. There is no prior training, or "warmup activities," little obvious facilitation, and for all pretenses and purposes, the whole thing runs all by itself. I hasten to add that this is not just another book about Open Space Technology, although it is certainly about *open space*, which in my lexicon describes the special circumstances and conditions necessary for the initiation and sustenance of selforganization.

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2 See *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide, 3rd* Edition (Owen/BerrettKoehler, 2008).

The utter simplicity of OST contrasts starkly with the results commonly achieved. Very large groups of people (2000+) are enabled to deal with massive, conflicted, and complex issues in a respectful and productive fashion—all in a very short period of time. From the point of view of conventional meeting and organizational management theory and practice—the demonstrated results simply could not happen. But they do, and continue in thousands of situations around the world. In seeking to understand this phenomenon the only adequate theoretical base that I have discovered is that provided by the work of various disciplines with the process of self–organization.

It is my intention to use the collective experience with OST as the point of departure for the deeper discussion of self–organization, our human systems as self–organizing, and the ways in which we may support and optimize their levels of performance. Ultimately this is about learning (remembering) and exercising our roles as Wave Riders, the true leaders in a self–organizing world. In this context, the 21–year experience with Open Space Technology becomes a natural experiment with all the strengths and limitations of such experiments.

Natural experiments, by definition, are unplanned, and in the case of OST that is definitely the case. The unplanned nature of such experiments means that many, if not all, of the standard controls are simply not in place, rendering confidence in the results open to question—until the sheer number of iterations tend to compensate for the possible effect of odd variables. Open Space Technology has now been run in excess of 100,000 times in 136 countries with comparable results. The experiment continues; however, my personal

comfort level with the results to date is such that I believe we are in a position to gather up the lessons learned about life in self–organizing systems and move on to the next phase of the natural experiment. We will use these lessons from OST as a basis for scal–ing up the enterprise—moving from the rather narrow confines of time/space limited events to the expanded and more critical realm of real, live organizations, large and small.

Preview of Coming Attractions

The book is divided into two parts. Part I, *Preparation for Wave Riding*, details the basic argument of the book (There is no such thing as a non–self–organizing system) and suggests the means and methods which will be of assistance when living and working in our self–organizing world. Part II, *The Wave Rider's Guide to the Future*, converts the more general and theoretical discussion of Part I into a practical approach. If your natural predilection is toward the practical, you may do well to reverse the order. Your choice.

In Part I, we begin with a consideration of the Holy Grail of all Wave Riders, and just about everybody else: Superior performance at the individual and organizational level. Peter Vaill, whose semi–nal work in this area initiated the contemporary discussion, referred to all of this collectively as a High Performing System (HPS). Curiously, he declined to actually define an HPS, however this omission is understandable since we always seem to recognize such creatures when we meet. Quite simply they do what they do with distinction, and in any event, outperform the competition. What Vaill chose not to define, he could clearly describe, which he

did in a short, but nevertheless watershed paper bearing the title, "Towards a Behavioral Description of High Performing Systems"[3]

Rushing in where Vaill chose not to go, I propose a possible definition of High Performance as the absence of its (apparent) opposites: Chaos, Confusion, and Conflict. The suggestion being that if only we could eliminate this troublesome trio, the high performance of our systems would be a surety. Unfortunately it seems that all three (especially the first—Chaos) are essential to life, and thus their elimination would not only fail to usher in high performance, but would usher out life. Which leaves us with the interesting problem of defining (understanding) high performance as including, but somehow transcending, chaos, confusion, and conflict.

My formulation goes as follows:

> *High Performance is the productive interplay of diverse, complex forces, including chaos, confusion, and conflict, characterized by wholeness, health, and harmony.* It is *harmonious*, including all elements of harmony both consonance and dissonance, in that multiple forces work together to create a unitary flow. It is whole in the sense that there is a clear focus, direction, and purpose. It is healthy in that the toxins of its process (metabolic byproducts in organisms) are eliminated effectively, and without prejudice to itself or environment. High Performance can never be sustained at the cost of a fouled nest. A *High Performing System* is one that does all of the above with excellence, over time, and certainly better than the competition.

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3 The paper was originally a photocopied "pass around" for friends and colleagues. Eventually it was published in *Leadership: Where Else Can We Go?* edited by Morgan McCall, Duke University Press, 1978. Vaill eventually did create a definition, which appears in his paper, *Purposing.*

Presuming that this definition, combined with the behavioral characteristics identified by Peter Vaill, is sufficient to indicate the object of our inquiry, the next question is simple: How do we get there from here? How do we bring our systems to the level of high performance?

For many of us the answer has come in terms of what might be called the Problem/Solution approach. When it is perceived that performance levels are declining, this is determined to be a prob–lem for which a "fix" must be found. The simple and obvious logic of the approach has much to commend it, and in truth it is quite effective, at least in the short term. However, over time difficulties arise, usually in terms of unintended consequences. The identified problem is fixed, but a host of new problems are generated which are as bad, or worse, than the original situation.

More recently, it has become apparent that the difficulty with the approach derives from the narrowness of the view. By concen–trating on a single problem and searching for a single fix, the larger aspects of the system and its environment are essentially ignored. And this ignorance comes back to bite us.

Enter Systemic Thinking. When searching for enhanced per–formance, we must consider the whole system, including all of its relations with the surrounding environment. This marvelous idea has enabled us to begin to comprehend the mind–blowing com–plexity of the human systems of our lives. However, when it comes to the successful conclusion of our search for high performance, the systems approach in its various manifestations (e.g., Business Process Re–Engineering) leaves something to be desired. In fact it might actually be seen as an exercise in futility.

The more precisely we identify the operative elements and relationships in our systems, the more it becomes clear that we confront a level of complexity that has no end. And when it comes to redesigning (re–engineering), the task is daunting. However, a daunting task could turn into a wonderful opportunity if we only had the time to complete our system's analysis before everything changed again. And here the cookie crumbles.

In our restless world, every thing is connected and everything is moving. Even worse, most of that connection and movement lies beneath (beyond) our capacity to apprehend. To add insult to injury, the chaos and complexity theorists tell us that the root of our prob–lem lies with a funny little butterfly flapping its wings in Thailand, thereby changing the weather patterns in California. To date that butterfly remains at large, hidden in an undisclosed location.

We might note that the conventional "Great Man" theory of leadership fits very naturally with the Problem/Solution approach, as well as its latter day reincarnation in Systemic Thinking where the "problem" becomes the whole system, and the fix becomes more complicated. The Great Man will define the problem and then decisively administer the fix, which is precisely why he is known as The Leader. However, to the extent that both approaches struggle or fail, so also does the Great Man theory of leadership.

Given the level of effort and our success to date, a monumental state of depression could well be justified—except for the fact that High Performing Systems continue to show up in our experience, but rarely where we expect them, and definitely not according to The Plan. Ordinary people do extraordinary things, under the most

unlikely circumstances. We consider such manifestations as anom-
alies, funny little exceptions to the rules.

By definition, an *anomaly* is something that happens "outside
the law" (Greek *a nomos*, "without law")—outlaws, so to speak. These
are the sorts of things that everybody knows could not, or should
not happen—but they did. Upon closer examination it usually
turns out that the anomaly was no outlaw. Either our perception
was flawed, and we failed to see how the law applied or (much
more rarely), the anomaly was totally within the law, but it was
just a different law than we were used to. The latter situation can
be a matter of real discomfort, particularly if we have a major
attachment to the old law. But the learning opportunity is pro-
found, for we may be at the edge of discovering a totally new way
of looking at our world. According to Thomas Kuhn, this is the
moment of Paradigm Shift.

Now for The Open Space Technology Experiment. For more
than 20 years, thousands of groups of people have gathered around
issues of common concern which manifest such levels of complexity
and conflict as to make resolution appear impossible. Following a
15-minute introduction, the group defines its issues, deals with the
practicalities of time and place of meeting—and goes to work.
There is no prior agenda setting, only a single facilitator who never
intervenes in the discussions—and at the end of the day (or more
usually two days) the accomplishments are real, and very often
quite unbelievable. Perhaps most remarkable, there is not a sign of
The Leader, great man or woman. Nobody is in charge.

For example, a $200,000,000 structure was designed, starting
with a blank sheet of paper, and ending with working architectural

drawings. Actually this was a re–design, occasioned by major changes in plans and circumstances. The previous effort had taken 10 months, and thus the group had managed to do in two days what they knew, on the basis of prior experience, would take 10 months. Figuring roughly, this comes down to a 15,000% increase in productivity, and the executive responsible described the outcome as "magic."

In fact it was not magic, but rather a significant (but not unique) application of Open Space Technology. This is definitely an anomaly within an anomaly. What the people accomplished repre– sents a severe challenge to credibility, and certainly the participants found it incredible ("magic"). But *how* they managed to achieve their results doesn't make any sense at all. Indeed it would seem to violate virtually every principle and procedure of group manage– ment and probably management practice as well. Talk about differ– ent rules!

If this book were simply about Open Space Technology, the tale might end right here and I could accept whatever accolades, as the originator of OST. In fact I know those accolades would be undeserved, and the tale has only just begun.

Searching for the *how* behind, or beneath, Open Space Technology takes us directly into the emerging science of chaos and complexity, and most particularly into the world of self–organizing systems. Of particular interest is the work of Stuart Kauffman, a biologist from the Santa Fe Institute, who has proposed that given certain very simple preconditions, order happens. The correlation between Kauffmann's preconditions, and what I had described as the essential conditions for the use of OST, is virtually 100%, and so it is

a natural step to the conclusion that the operative force beneath OST was none other than the primal power of self–organization.

Should you ask—is this true, my response can only be, I think so. At the very least the identification of OST with self–organization provides the only rational explanation I have encountered for an otherwise completely anomalous occurrence. If OST is not magic, it must be self–organization, or so I propose.

Going forward, the logic is clear and simple. If superior per–formance (HPS) is the common result of OST, and OST itself is a manifestation of the power of self–organization, it would make sense to remove the "middle man" (OST). Or put somewhat differ–ently, if we were able to initiate and sustain the force of self–organization, it should be possible to achieve high perform–ance on some regular basis. We might call this, *The Care and Feeding of Self-organizing Systems.* At this point we arrive at the core realization of all Wave Riders. Not only do we live in a self–organizing world, but our job—or perhaps better, our opportunity, is to leverage this force for our purposes and so ride the waves of self–organization as an intentional and conscious act.

In developing the material which appears in Part II, *The Wave Rider's Guide to the Future* (Chapter 9 and following), I have kept in mind the interests of a younger friend. I'll call him Steve. After reading the manuscript of this book, Steve said that while he loved all the stuff about self–organizing systems, he still had a business to run, bills to pay, and product to get out the door. And he wasn't at all sure that any, or all, of this could be accomplished through self–organization. He didn't say it, but I think he was asserting that, "Somebody simply has to take charge."

It occurred to me at the time that I should wish him a great deal of luck, but not much encouragement. For after all, if my major premise is correct (There is no such thing as a non–self–organizing system), Steve, and all the other "Steves" in the world really don't have any choice. It's all self–organizing. And the notion of "taking charge," as in *running* that system (his business)— just doesn't quite fit.

That said, I take his point and feel his concern. In fact there are multiple concrete steps Steve can take which will enable (but by no means guarantee) that bills are paid and product leaves the prem– ises. I have outlined these steps, along with a number of examples from my own experience and the experience of colleagues. I would hasten to add that none of the material should be confused with the final version of *The Wave Rider's Guide*. The experiment continues, and the final word has yet to be spoken.

The book concludes with an imaginary tale describing a *Day in the Life of a Wave Rider*, along with a tale from a genuine Wave Rider, Dee Hock of VISA International. *The Day in the Life* is imaginary only in the sense that it is described from the point of view of you the reader; however all the reported events and strategies actually took place in my own experience or the experience of friends and colleagues. Dee Hock and VISA are definitely not imaginary.

Preparation for Wave Riding

A s with all roles and tasks, Wave Riding requires prepara–
tion. It is essential to identify what we are looking for (in
this case High Performance), the environment we will be
operating in, and some of the basic mechanisms and obstacles to
be encountered along the way. In addition, the limitations and
shortfalls of previous efforts in the quest for High Performance will
be considered to the extent that this is helpful in understanding
the unique position of Wave Riders, and the waves upon which
they ride.

The Holy Grail: Superior Performance

I n 1975, my friend and colleague Peter Vaill (at that point the Dean of the Business School at George Washington University) wrote a short paper which turned out to be long on influence. The paper bore the academic sounding title, "Towards a Behavioral Description of High Performing Systems," However, as Peter was quick to admit, the academics were only skin deep, if only because he found himself "unable to say what a High Performing System is." So much for academic precision, and it gets worse. It turns out that the thoughts expressed did not result from careful research but rather from "intuitive leaps" most of which occurred in "one four hour burst." In fairness, Vaill carefully identified each of his Behavioral Characteristics as "hypotheses," which indicates that they are subject to future validation, although he says nothing about how such research might be conducted, and expresses no interest in pursuing it. At whatever risk, I can only say—It worked for me.

It is true that many have written about high performance in human systems before and after Peter Vaill, but the appearance of his paper was a watershed in my estimation. Those of us who hap–pened to receive a copy found our view of organizations, the way they were supposed to work, and how we might work with them changed in ways that, at least in my own case, would take years to

fully appreciate. Some of the other recipients of the paper obviously came to a quicker (and positive) conclusion, most notably Peters and Waterman. Peter Vaill's "intuitive leaps" became a cornerstone of a much larger effort which hit the streets bearing the title, *In Search of Excellence.*[4]

The fact that many of the organizations cited by Peters and Waterman as being "excellent" have now gone out of business does not detract from the powerful impact of this book. Indeed, it might be said that the history of organization and management thought during the succeeding years has been all about that search for what has turned out to be a most elusive quarry—Excellence. Or, were we to revert to the words of Peter Vaill, High Performing Systems. In short, we have been pursuing excellence and High Performance ever since, but somehow we never quite get there. Or perhaps more accurately, we never quite get there "according to the plan." Excellence and high performance keep showing up—but rarely when we might expect them, even less when we planned on their arrival. But all of that is to get considerably ahead of our story, which properly begins with Peter Vaill's "Behavioral Characteristics."

The Behavioral Characteristics of High Performing Systems according to Peter Vaill

In the 1977 revision of his earlier paper, Vaill identifies some 52 char–acteristics. With frankness uncharacteristic of most academic papers

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4 Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies* (HarperCollins, 1982).

he admits to certain favorites. In his own words, "Some hypotheses I am in love with and some I am not very interested in." For the most part, Vaill's favorites are those characteristics that would pertain to systems of all sorts, and the balance is more narrowly focused on businesses, and particularly manufacturing businesses (with machines). Following Vaill's lead, I have focused on the favorites. The numbers at the end of each quote are Vaill's original numbers.

- **Do Not Follow the Rule Book** ("There may be a public, objec-tive theory or 'rule book' about how to do the thing that the HPS is doing, but there will always be discrepancies between this public recipe and what the HPS is actually doing. This may be called the 'Doug Sanders backswing' hypothesis to remind golfer–readers that orthodoxy is not an absolute virtue." #7)

- **Members Can't Explain It** ("Communication about how and why the HPS operates as it does from members to outsiders will tend to be in platitudes and generalities, or by showing rather than telling at all. Members will feel and often say, 'There's no way I can explain it to you." #10)

- **Members Experience "Peak Experiences"** ("Members will report 'peak experiences' in connection with their participation in the HPS. They will 'enthuse', 'bubble', communicate 'joy' and 'exultation'." #12)

- **Performance Breakthroughs Occur in Unplanned Ways** ("Performance breakthroughs occur in unplanned ways. Hypothesis 12 will be especially obvious on these occasions. Members will account for the event in relatively non–opera-tional idioms, such as 'we finally got it all together'." #13)

- **External Controls Are Seen As Irrelevant—Never Look at the Clock** ("External controls on the activity of the HPS are seen by members as at best irrelevant and at worst as positive impediments to performance. Circumvention of the rules tends to be overt and non–apologetic." #17. Also #20: "Members seek relief from the pressures of participation in the HPS according to criteria which are internal to the system—its current phase of operations and the needs and expectations of other members. External schedules for relief and breaks are usually regarded by members as inappropriate.")

- **The System Is Always "ON"—Even If You Can't See It** ("The system does not have a clear OFF/ON character. Members may regard it as ON when it seems OFF to observers, and OFF when it seems ON. The system's movement from one state to the other is often difficult to detect from the outside." #19)

- **Neighboring Organizations Are Not Necessarily Pleased with HPS's Output.** ("The social value of the output of an HPS is problematic. Entities in the HPS's environment will not auto–matically be 'pleased' with its output." # 24)

- **Members May Be Perceived as Thrill Seekers, Weirdos, or Mystics** ("To the extent that members find participation in the HPS thrilling, they may become 'thrill seekers.' Activity in the HPS may provide a wide variety of sensual, affective, and cogni–tive experiences which, over time, members may become 'moti–vated' to attain and re–experience. For the most part, this kind of motivation may be relatively incomprehensible to observers. They may come to regard members so motivated as 'weirdoes'

or 'mystics.' Negative judgments about members' maturity and even morality may be made by untrained observers." #34)

- **HPS's Groove** ("HPS's exhibit a rhythm of operation which is both subjectively felt by members and objectively evident to observers. An argot will exist for describing this rhythm, for example, 'tempo' (chess); 'footing' (yacht racing); 'wailing' (improvisational jazz); also 'getting it on' and 'grooving'—and note that 'grooving' has been extended in its application to many other activities; 'taking it to . . . (the opposing team)'; 'traction' (term coined by W. Baldamus to account for the ten–dency of an assembly line job to pull the worker along); 'hitting one's stride'; 'having a hot hand' (basketball); 'getting the boat set up' (crew); and 'mounting a charge' (golf). The general phe–nomenon that these terms refer to is that the same or improved effects are produced with substantially less effort than before the particular rhythm was achieved." #39)

In reviewing Vaill's Behavioral Characteristics of HPS's, it quickly becomes apparent that the organizations described are anything but "standard issue." Consider, for example, the characteristic, *Members May Be Perceived As Thrill Seekers, Weirdos, or Mystics.* And the other char–acteristics are scarcely better. The fact that members *Do Not Follow the Rule Book* is sufficient to drive any well–trained manager to distraction.

To the extent that Vaill's Characteristics accurately reflect the general behaviors and conditions of High Performing Systems—doing what they do with Excellence, it is perhaps not surprising that the search for excellence has often come up empty–handed.

And when it comes to our efforts to foster the development of such systems, our success just might have all of the popularity of a skunk at a garden party. It could turn out that although excellence and High Performance are valued in the abstract, the behavior of those who actually achieve these laudable states is socially unacceptable. Despite the odds, there can be little question that the search for both continues with intensity.

this material has been excerpted from

Wave Rider:
Leadership for High Performance
in a Self-Organizing World

by Harrison Owen
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