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The Art of Protection

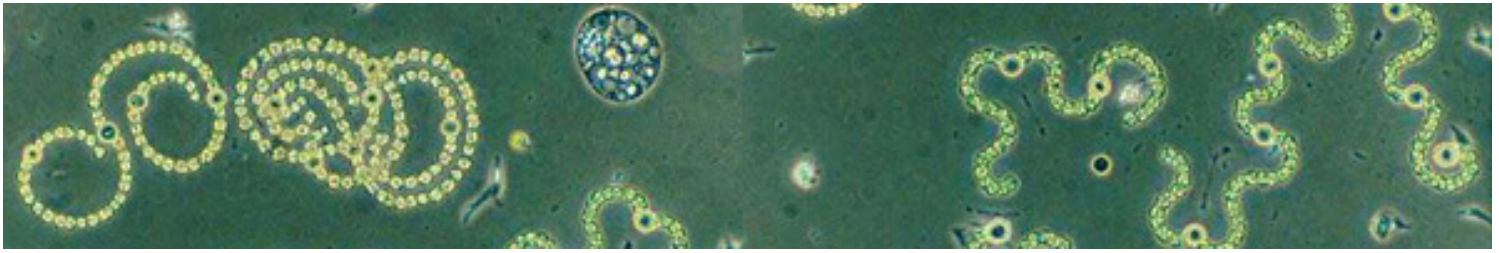
Whenever you create something, there are risks. Risks of all kinds.

There are risks that you don't yet have what it takes – skills, allies, clarity, confidence or resources. There are risks that those invested in the status quo will react negatively to your innovation. And there may be a host of impersonal and interpersonal forces that exert pressure to return things to “normal,” as sad or dysfunctional as normal might be.

How do we protect our tender creations from the various forces, personal and impersonal, that threaten them? Before we begin to tackle that question, let's set the stage a little more thoroughly.

In this corner..., as the boxing announcer would say, we have a new innovation, a potentially better way of doing things with few backers, little or no track record, and something that is probably difficult for most people to understand. This may be a new methodology, a partnership on a broader scale, a deeper sense of ethics, a more open and transparent way of working, a





Even single celled and other simple organisms have sophisticated means of protection. Cell membranes must block toxins and pathogens from entering while freely allowing oxygen and other nutrients in. At the same time, the membrane allows waste (food for another part of the system) to go out.

How does that kind of sophisticated semi-permeability show up in healthy teams, organizations and communities?

more inclusive ethos, a new market, a product innovation or a reconciliation with a long-time competitor. We ourselves may – and probably do – entertain some doubts about the viability of our creation. The new creation may replace something that has worked for a long time. It may actually put some people out of work – or create situations that would demand great adaptability of ourselves, our cohorts, others in our organization, or even people we don't know.

In the opposite corner ..., we have the status quo. Weighing in at a million pounds, the status quo is well-financed, well-connected and well-dressed. Perhaps a bit clumsy at times, but still a formidable adversary on the best of days. Sometimes the status quo just needs to shift its weight a bit, and threats are squashed. Sometimes it can afford to ignore minor irritants, letting them exhaust themselves. And sometimes it gets more irritated and forceful. The status quo can operate on financial, competitive, legal, personal or political levels. The status quo has a lot invested in keeping things under control and static.

The kinds of stories that unfold when the bell rings are pretty familiar:

- A manager or executive asks for ideas and consultation – and then does what he or she originally intended anyway.
- A corporation or government department engages in a public consultation, but weeks or months later, everyone wonders if anything came of it.
- A team or organization engages in an inspiring team-building workshop, only to see the “glow” wear off in a week or two – perhaps to be replaced by a deeper cynicism.
- Idea-of-the-month clubs of all kinds that somehow lapse into obscurity.

How do we protect ourselves, our colleagues and our organizations from such reversals? What can we do to “lock in” the advances made by individuals and groups? How can we detect

threats before they become manifest and take their toll?

These are the kinds of questions that a group of colleagues and I will be exploring in a four-day workshop and dialogue called, *The Art of Protection*. Held April 21-25 near Volos, Greece, the dialogue will draw on a diverse range of expertise among the workshop leaders. Anita Paalvast holds a black belt in Aikido and leads workshops linking Aikido and leadership. Yitzhak Mendelsohn, a clinical psychologist from Israel, has extensive experience healing the individual and collective trauma associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Sarah Whiteley, Maria Scordialou and I are professional dialogue hosts and facilitators, and I bring my study of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, as well as various contemplative approaches to conflict. Sarah and Maria also bring theory, experience and understanding of living systems. End of commercial; see the sidebar for more information about *The Art of Protection*.

The questions of protection do not have easy or formulaic answers. But here are some of the themes and questions that suggest themselves:

What is the difference between defensiveness and protection?

In general, we associate defensiveness with a weaker and guarded position – one that has lost strength in fact. Defensiveness also lacks a larger vision; we are mired in questions of individual survival. Alliances are harder to forge in a defensive position. The word “protection” suggests in part protecting something larger than oneself. And larger than one's ideology, nationality or identity. So genuine protection, one that is sustainable, communicative and strong seems to involve

The Art of Protection (April 21-25) will be hosted at a unique setting on the Aegean coast, Axladitsa-Avatakia (Axladitsa for short). This is a sustainable learning centre dedicated to cultivating new forms of leadership, based on a direct connection with the elements.

Check out *The Art of Protection* as well as other programs and gatherings at www.axladitsa.org.



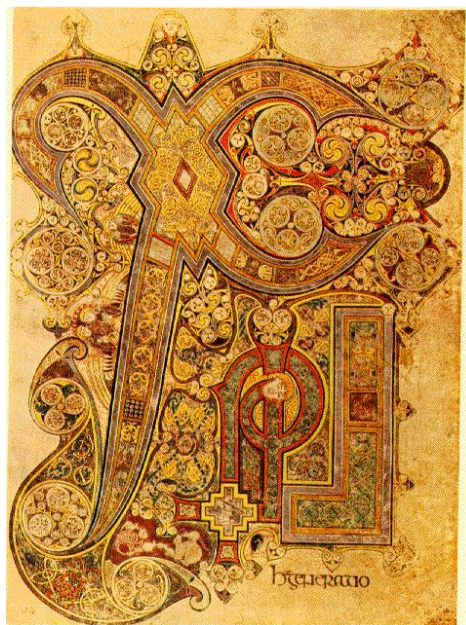
stepping beyond one's usual sense of identity. If we think of a healthy cell membrane, it offers some protection of the cell's interior, while admitting nutrients and participating in the life of the larger organism and environment.

What is the value of vulnerability? Usually, when we think of vulnerability, we think "bad." However, both Aikido and meditative disciplines suggest that, paradoxically, there is strength in vulnerability. From an Aikido point of view, a threat cannot be disarmed without getting into close relationship with it. From a meditative point of view, resting in vulnerability opens the door to insight, patience, and openness. Easy to say, tough to practice! There is of course a big difference between being vulnerable and being naive.

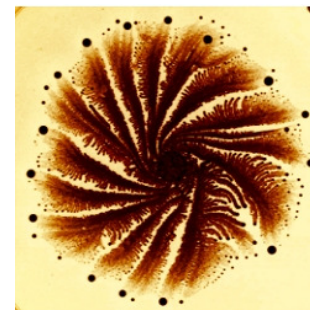
How does one detect threats? How we pay attention and how we detect threats is crucial. We cannot simply hope for the best, thinking maybe the threat won't find us or won't direct its attention our way. Detection of threats has to do with how we sense our environment, what we choose to pay attention to, and whether or not we take time to reflect and interpret what we are sensing. It is also related, of course, to listening to what our colleagues are saying.

Taking whole – redefining "victory." Once a threat is identified, one approach – which may not be the best – is to somehow eliminate the threat. It is wise also to consider how the threat can be transformed into an ally, or a support for our work. This strategy of incorporation – which Sun Tzu calls, "taking whole" – is the superior way of dealing with threats. Otherwise, we are liable to engage in full-scale battle.

Send me your stories and questions related to protection; I would love to share them in future issues of CO-CREATION. Or come to Greece in April! (www.axladitsa.org)



When has protection been important in your work? What strategies succeeded or failed (or both)?



Setting the Context – More lessons from the World Café

In the last issue of CO-CREATION, we introduced the World Café, an innovative meeting methodology that can be employed in a broad variety of contexts, including strategic planning, stakeholder consultations, conferences, departmental meetings, interdepartmental meetings, or any kind of large group tasked with a purpose. Café has a way of eliciting the common understandings, uncovering the hidden diversities, and laying the ground for coordinating collective action.

But there's more to Café than a meeting methodology. The principles of Café (see diagram) are usable in a broad spectrum of formal and informal meetings. In this and subsequent issues, I will explore the various principles of World Café and how they might inform our day-to-day, *non-Café* work.

The first principle is *Set the Context*. This is one of the more neglected meeting practices I have found. For a successful meeting, it is important to consciously design it. This means being clear about the purpose, deciding who should attend, and identifying what the non-negotiables are.

Being clear – absolutely clear! – about the purpose of each and every meeting is the single most important step in its design. Take an example. The email announcement says, "Please attend a mid-project review for the XYZ design initiative. We will look at performance against budget, review project milestones, and see what is necessary to ensure that the remaining project timeline is adhered to."

Is this a clear statement of purpose?

Yes and no. If the purpose is to **attend, look, review** and **see**, then it's perfectly fine. But chances are the underlying (and clearer!) purposes are tangible. Maybe they could be articulated





in something resembling the following: “At the mid-project review for the XYZ initiative, we will decide the best way to handle current cost overruns, both in terms of time and money, and taking into account what we have learned, figure out and agree upon the actions that will best bring this project to completion.”

Another example. Most people regard the term, “public consultation,” as code for any number of possibilities – everything from being compelled to listen to the public complain for a mandated period of time ... all the way to genuinely listening to people because you truly believe they have the best knowledge and intelligence to solve the problem at hand.

Crafting clear purposes

It’s always good to frame the purpose of any meeting in a single, simple sentence, and this is not an easy task. In crafting a purpose, you will likely be working with two competing impulses. First you want the purpose to be clear and compelling. To do this may take some soul searching. Ask yourself, “What is truly *the* most important thing to achieve here?” This may help you get at your intuitive sense of what’s needed.

Next you may need to temper that intuitive leap with some rational considerations. Use, for example, the SMART checklist (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound), and see how you can sharpen your intention in those ways.

You may need to go back and forth between intuitive and rational. Concise can be very alluring, but may not stand up to scrutiny. On the other hand, fully SMART-compliant purposes can read like legalese, and put people to sleep.

In any case, know that your attention to the purpose is time well spent. Don’t underestimate this. There is a kind of magic in a meeting’s stated intention – it tends to be self-fulfilling. People consciously and unconsciously respond to the stated intention. Casually crafted intention gets casually crafted results.

Deciding on audience

With World Café, some of the commonest criteria for audience are out the window. For example, many times we limit participation in meetings because there larger numbers of people



become unwieldy, conflict-prone and alienating. The World Café, on the other hand, is a scalable methodology, having been used with groups as large as 1500.

Another reason to limit participation is a conscious or unconscious attempt to secure harmony. Of course, this runs the serious risk of limiting diversity. Because the World Café invites deeper listening and cross-pollination of perspectives, diversity is regarded as an asset instead of a potential obstacle.

For smaller non-Café meetings, you will need to decide what size of group is workable from a number of other considerations: space available, costs of participation, and the task at hand.

But never forget the most important invitation criterion: *Invite the people for whom the purpose matters deeply.*

Know your post-meeting follow-up

Once you know your purpose and your audience, you should be thinking immediately about how the outcomes will be recorded after people will walk out of the room. The choices are endless, but here are just a few:

- Minutes. Minutes are best when they are succinct and action-oriented. Most people will actually read the minutes if it focuses on commitments, deadlines and responsible parties. Generally I recommend staying away from he-said, she-said.
- Harvest Documents. Generally, Cafés use colourful and

One of the most efficient means of recording commitments and priorities is a cluster map.

On it you can gather related ideas (large post-its), people making a commitment to make this initiative happen (small post-its), and the larger groups' sense of priority (voting with small coloured dots).



Going Further

Book:

Brown, J., Isaacs, D. et al.
*The World Café: Shaping
 our futures through
 conversations that matter.*
 Berrett-Koehler, 2006.

Website:

www.theworldcafe.com

informal harvest documents. Something that brings back the experience of connection and meaning. Photos are good, including photos of drawings, clusters of post-its, and something of the surrounding environment. Important insights and all decisions and commitments should be highlighted in some way

- Murals. Sometimes “mind maps” or other large pictorial displays are helpful ways for people to reconnect with what happened.

Generally, we over-rely on straight minutes, which read a little like a transcript. See how you might change the form or format of the meeting record that make it readable, memorable, interesting and credible.

Next issue: We will discuss another Café principle that applies to meeting preparation, “Creating Hospitable Space.”

Article Review: *The Servant as Leader*

By Robert K. Greenleaf



Maybe you, like me, have heard about Robert Greenleaf’s *The Servant as Leader* or the concept of servant leadership for a long time. A Google search for “servant as leader” will yield hundreds of thousands of hits. It has certainly entered into the mainstream lexicon.

But I wonder how many have ever read the original essay, *The Servant as Leader*? As for me, I only recently got around to reading this 37-page essay, and I have to confess I was struck by how much is packed into such a tiny package. It is so pithy, in fact, that one reviewer recommends that digesting it in small, bite-sized sittings. Good advice, from my experience.

First published in 1970, *The Servant as Leader* is much more than an admonition to leaders to be nice to employees and customers. It is a piece of writing that arises out of a unique historical juncture and speaks quite clearly about the changing nature of leadership in our time. As such, *The Servant as Leader* has affected leadership and management thinkers since,

notably Margaret Wheatley (author of *Leadership and the New Sciences*, for example) and Peter Senge (author of *The Fifth Discipline*, for example).

Some leaders, says Greenleaf, are motivated first by a wish to serve, only to be followed by the act of leading. Other leaders of course wish to lead first and may or may not include service as part of their leadership. So the article is firstly about the motivations of leaders.

What is a servant leader? The best test is to look at the people served by that leader. Do they grow? Are they healthier, more autonomous, freer, wiser and more likely to become servant leaders themselves?

There are related aspects or qualities of the servant leader that Greenleaf discusses: listening, detachment, intuition, empathy, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Each is an essay unto itself.

Even though most of the work reads like a treatise, Greenleaf does share the stories of three leaders, and I thought I would share those stories here. Greenleaf's intention was to show how truly great changes can be effected in dramatically different ways – there is no formula for how a servant leader serves.

One story is about the Quaker, John Woolman, who more or less single-handedly got all members of his faith to give up slave holding almost 100 years before the Civil War. How did he do this? By persistence and gentle persuasion. He traveled up and down the East Coast of the U.S. visiting slaveholders and engaging them in dialogue and raising questions. He did it in such a way as not to raise the animosity or resistance of the slaveholders. And ultimately, he was successful. Greenleaf speculates that, had there been just a few John Woolman's, the Civil War might have been avoided, the end of slavery expedited, and the transition out of racism accelerated. **Point of the story:** *persuasion and dialogue can often get better and faster results than confrontation.*

The second leader is more familiar to many, Thomas Jefferson, drafter of the American Declaration of Independence, and the



All authority belongs to the people.

– Thomas Jefferson

About CO-CREATION

I hope you enjoyed **CO-CREATION**; it is my intention that each issue be a useful, fun and thought-provoking resource.

As a coach, facilitator and consultant to individuals and teams, my guiding principle is that the creative task be shared and cultivated in everyone involved. I firmly believe that the outcomes are thereby made better, particularly in the long run.

Let me know what wisdom you are finding. Join in the co-creation of **CO-CREATION** by sending me your thoughts, articles, responses, and we'll see where it takes us.

If you are interested in my coaching, facilitation or consulting services, here is how to get in touch with me:

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country's third president. After the Declaration, and in the midst of the subsequent war, Jefferson was invited to any number of positions and roles in the emergent independence movement. Instead, he took the unusual move of becoming a legislator in the Virginia legislature. During his time there, he drafted 150 statutes, 50 of which were enacted during his term. Traveling back and forth between his home at Monticello and Williamsburg, the state capital at the time, Jefferson spent his time drafting statutes and advocating on behalf of them. Many of those statutes became key aspects of the subsequent US Constitution, notably the separation of church and state. When the Constitution was being drafted, Jefferson was in France as US Ambassador, but it didn't matter; he had already made his contribution. **Point of the story:** *Jefferson understood his strengths and declined temptations to step outside of them.*

The third story was new to me, but is probably familiar to my Danish readers: Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, who is known as the Father of Danish Folk High Schools. At the beginning of the 19th century, Denmark was still quite feudal, agricultural, and in general lagged behind the rest of Europe. Grundtvig pursued, for fifty years, his vision of peasants moving from an underclass to the position of being *the main* political entity in Danish society. He accomplished this by supporting the formation of high schools throughout the country. By the latter half of the 19th century, when Denmark lost territory and was confronted by a worldwide collapse in corn prices, the farmers of Denmark were autonomous and capable enough to adapt. **Point of the story:** *Grundtvig's vision was compelling in part because it was based on love and respect for the people he was serving.*

The Servant as Leader has so much more packed into it. It will stretch you, in a good way. For those interested in leadership, I recommend it.