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## *My Grandmother's Kitchen: A Metaphor for Organizations in the New Paradigm*

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# My Grandmother's Kitchen: A Metaphor for Organizations in the New Paradigm

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*Metaphor procedures developed by Richard Kopp (1995) are applied to effect a paradigm shift to what is referred to as a 'quantum worldview'. The metaphor of the author's grandmother's kitchen illustrates the application of the procedures and the shift. A description of an ideal organization and its leadership is the result.*

Coaching in organizations has emerged as part of a 20<sup>th</sup> Century phenomenon that qualifies as a paradigm shift in Kuhn's (1962) terminology. According to Kuhn, a paradigm is a mindset through which a person, organization, or society views the world. Broadly speaking, the paradigm through which Western European society viewed the world from after the Middle Ages until recently could be characterized as

- deterministic
- reductionist
- materialistic
- linear
- dualistic
- individualistic
- hierarchical
- problem-oriented.

I will apply the term "mechanistic" to refer to this paradigm (Rock & Page, in press).

Coaching has arisen in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century along with globalization and discoveries in physics. These trends have shaken assumptions about the search for "objective truth" that have dominated intellectual thought since Isaac Newton's discovery of classical mechanics in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Because we are in the process of making this shift, it is difficult to see it clearly, but in general the new paradigm can be said to be

- probabilistic
- systemic
- values-oriented
- dialectic
- holistic
- contextual
- diverse
- strengths-oriented.

I use the term "quantum" for this new paradigm (Rock & Page, in press).

It is important to note that the new paradigm does not replace the old. Rather, awareness of underlying assumptions allows for a conscious, "choiceful" selection of the approach that is most appropriate for the

circumstances. Thus, the most promising aspect of the shift is that humanity has the option of taking a “meta-view” and choosing paradigms according to its goals and values. This is a process that is quite consistent with coaching (see Bergquist & Mura, 2005).

Applying this process to the world of organizations and organizational coaching, where do we look for paradigms that allow for more choices? Neuroscience has provided a model that can guide coaches and clients in envisioning health and well-being. According to Siegel, “. . .neural integration, mental coherence, and empathic relationships can be seen as three aspects of the one reality of well-being” (2007, p. 199). Jim Collins (2001) provides a model for “great” organizations, but his criteria relied mainly on financial performance measured in hindsight. Is it possible for an organization to be great in other ways and to design itself for greatness despite the vagaries of stocks and markets? To be fair, Collins attempts to answer this question. But where else can we find models that break out of the strictures of the mechanistic paradigm to explore and incorporate elements of the quantum worldview?

Metaphors provide one option. Metaphors are a bridge (so to speak) between our linear, logical, verbal capacities and our ability to think in nonlinear, analogical, imagistic ways. Exploring client-generated metaphors has proven enormously powerful in creating choices in psychotherapy (Kopp, 1995). In Kopp’s approach, metaphors are generated by the client, not the psychotherapist, so the method fits well with coaching. Kopp has been part of developing metaphor coach training for Adler International Learning’s Professional Coaching Program (2007). He has also provided training in what he calls “psychorganizational coaching” at Adler.

### THE SITUATION

In psychotherapy, Kopp begins metaphor work by asking about the problem that a client brings to therapy. This is easily transformed into a strengths- or potential-oriented coaching context by asking about what a client imagines as a desired goal, or “If anything were possible, what would you want?” In an organizational context, this question might be “If anything were possible, what would this organization be like?”

The coach uses open-ended questions to support the client in exploring this question, defined as “the situation.” “Tell me more.” “What would that look like?” “What would be happening?” As an important part of this exploring-the-situation phase, the coach asks questions that connect the client personally with the potential of the situation: “How does that feel to you?” “What would that be like?” “How would you experience that?”

The exploratory phase ends with a series of steps that encourage the client to generate a metaphor and then to transform that metaphor into insights that can affect the real situation that the metaphor represents. Let me illustrate using my own search for what I would like to see in my own organization:

Here’s the situation: I was working with my coach on getting my organization to be the best that it could be. To be a place where we all enjoyed coming to work. Where we felt we were accomplishing something important and making

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*There is a lot going on, a lot of activity, but I feel a sense of order, like everyone knows what they have to do.*

a difference in the world. Where we all felt respected and appreciated. I would feel proud of a place like that, and as a result I would have a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction. What would that be like for me? It would be *like bringing a dish to a potluck* or working with my cousins and aunts and grandmother *preparing a holiday dinner*. The coaching process in which I was about to be engaged involved the transformation of my metaphor (for a summary of this process in psychotherapy, see Kopp & Eckstein, 2004, pp. 173-174).

### **Step 1. Notice the Metaphors!**

In my exploration of the situation above, I used two metaphors that are italicized: “*like bringing a dish to a potluck*” and “*preparing a holiday dinner*.” This step seems simple, but metaphors are so common in our spoken language that they can fly right past us without our noticing (like that one). So we have to be on the lookout for them. (Notice the metaphors!)

### **Step 2. Pose the Question**

“When you say [*repeat the metaphoric image—in this case “a holiday potluck”*], what image/picture comes to mind?” or “What image/picture do you see in your mind’s eye?” Kopp insists, and my own experience supports, that it is crucial to

*This was an opportunity to put experiential “legs” on the theory that people gain a sense of belonging from being able to contribute to the group.*

pick one of these two questions and ask it in *exactly* the way it is written above. Kopp has spent years perfecting the wording that invites us to operate in an internal mental processing domain. We leave behind the necessity to conform to external reality, in this case the reality of my existing organization, and instead inhabit the creative space of our own mental images. Kopp calls this the “metaphoric domain.” Coaches who are sensitive to the types of energy expressed by a client will recognize signals of “inner processing.” At this point, an observer would see my eyes de-focusing as I engage my mind’s eye to picture a potluck holiday dinner. Whether this is from my own experience or my imagination makes no difference in the effectiveness of this process.

### **Step 3. Explore the Metaphor as a Sensory Image**

My coach and I stayed with that metaphoric image (not referring back at this point to the organization).

**a) Setting**—“Describe the scene.” It’s in my grandmother’s kitchen when she lived in the big house on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. There are dishes of food all over the kitchen table, and people are going in and out of the kitchen bringing more food.

**b) Action/interaction**—“What else is going on?” (in the metaphoric image—in this case the holiday dinner) My aunts are peeling potatoes and snapping peas and washing tomatoes and lettuce. Grandmother has given each of us little kids something to do. My cousin is setting the table in the dining room. I’m stirring something—icing, I think.

**c) Time**—“What led up to this? What was happening just before” We had driven up the day before. My aunts and uncles and cousins had come in from the farm that day. The ones from far away had come for a whole week to celebrate the holidays together. The neighbors were all coming, too.

### **Step 4. Ask About Experience**

“What’s your experience of [*the metaphoric image—in this case, preparing for the holiday dinner*]?” I’m standing there stirring the icing and feeling very proud that

I'm making something, like everyone else. There is a lot going on, a lot of activity, but I feel a sense of order, like everyone knows what they have to do.

### **Step 5. If You Could Change the Image...**

*"If you could change the image in any way, how would you change it?"* Where the process starts with a problem or a sense of "being stuck," as is the case with a psychotherapy intervention, this step is critical. It enables the client to stay within the metaphoric domain in order to explore options that may be inaccessible within the problem-defined mental space. However, when the original question is about potential, the answer to this question is often, "I wouldn't change anything. It's perfect as it is." This indicates that the image is indeed an ideal—although it never hurts to ask about possible changes. In my case, I realized that the image of my grandmother's kitchen represented an ideal, and I didn't want to change it.

*I am here to create a place where we all bring our best dish to the table, where everyone has important work to do, and where no one goes hungry.*

### **Step 6. Make the Connections**

In the case where the client changes the original metaphoric image, the coach asks *"What connections or parallels do you see between your original (before the change) image and the situation?"* For a problem-oriented situation, this often allows a totally new perspective to emerge. In my case, I didn't change the metaphoric image, so my coach skipped to the next step.

### **Step 7. Apply the Learning**

*"How might what you have learned apply to your current situation?"* Coaches will recognize the opportunity for rich exploration of what learning did occur. This step, and indeed the whole process, could last minutes or could go on over several sessions. In my case, it formed the basis for weeks of exploration, summarized below:

I learned a different attitude toward what Collins (2001) describes as "putting the right people in the right seats on the bus." I realized that I had at first taken this expression as indicating a very top-down, even manipulative, activity. After doing the metaphor work, I saw it as much more collaborative, where people are consulted about what their "best dish" might be. This potential contribution is fit into the whole menu, to whatever extent possible.

I also utilized my image of a child mixing icing to recognize how important it is for each of us to have important work to do. This work must fit our capacity, yes, but it should also be valued by our coworkers and the organization as a whole. This was an opportunity to put experiential "legs" on the theory that people gain a sense of belonging from being able to contribute to the group.

I also recognized the potential for an organization that draws on the best of people's contributions. I have always thought of potlucks as perfect illustrations of synergy: everyone does less work in preparing half of what they would make for their own meal, but there is more variety and twice as much food as they can eat—usually enough for the neighbor who drops by unexpectedly. After this exercise, I came to see that financial success can be a byproduct of an organization that operates in this way. When people are free to contribute their best efforts, and when those efforts are valued, the organization flourishes.

*Whenever I read descriptions of leadership qualities and competencies, I realize anew how much leadership was represented in my grandmother's kitchen.*

I formulated these principles as my own organizational “mission statement”: I am here to create a place where we all bring our best dish to the table, where everyone has important work to do, and where no one goes hungry.

### CONCLUSION: A NOTE ABOUT LEADERSHIP

Clearly, my grandmother’s kitchen did not come into being on its own. It was *her* kitchen, and she took on the task of making sure there were resources available to make the food preparation and serving possible: utensils, pots and pans, dishes, serving platters, spices, condiments, and the stove and counter. This was part of the material foundation that is necessary for any human endeavor.

*There are dishes of food all over the kitchen table, and people are going in and out of the kitchen bringing more food.*

She also set the time and date of meals, in consultation with the rest of the family. She coordinated the different dishes being planned, asking for more of some, less of others, and vetoing still others. She made sure important elements were not left out, like beverages for the children or enough butter for the corn. She put different people in charge of specific areas and watched to make sure everything got done.

She did this all with great warmth, generosity, and a sense of wonder—she loved discovering new kitchen gadgets and new recipes. Whenever I read descriptions of leadership qualities and competencies, I realize anew how much leadership was represented in my grandmother’s kitchen.

Only recently have I also recognized that her kitchen, as old-fashioned as it may seem, is in fact an example of the new paradigm beyond the hierarchical command-and-control model: values-oriented, contextual, diverse, and strengths-oriented. My wish is that people everywhere in the world bring their best dishes to share, have important work to do that is valued by others, and never go hungry. And that we are all blessed to work with and be leaders like my grandmother.

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