

DANCING AT THE EDGE

**Competence, Culture and
Organization in the 21st Century**

FOREWORD only

SECOND EDITION

with a foreword by Ed Schein

**Maureen O'Hara
Graham Leicester**



Dancing at the Edge

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Competence, Culture and Organization
in the 21st Century

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FOREWORD – Edgar H. Schein

This book is a remarkable paradox. It is certainly not a ‘How-to’ book that teaches you some new skill to make you a better leader. Rather, it is a deep dive into what is going on in and around us that we must understand in order to cope with today’s and tomorrow’s realities. So it is a How-to book that asks nothing less of you than that you become a new person; a book that will enable you to understand and change what is going on and, in that process, will not only make you a better person, but enable you to make a better world. The authors, one a Rogerian clinician and organizational psychologist, the other a former diplomat and policymaker, have a deep understanding of the challenges that face the world and provide in this book a challenge to us as readers to get on board and take this deep dive with them.

This book reviews and analyses the pressing global problems of today from a psychological, social, and most of all cultural perspective, and invites us to think about and engage with this level of complexity. The problems which human society faces on a planet that may not be able to sustain that society much longer are, by definition, complex, multifaceted and systemic. And, inasmuch as we are coping with open, dynamic, and unpredictable events, many of these problems are *unknowable* at this stage. The challenge for humanity, then, is to develop the capacity to deal with potentially difficult challenges *that are not yet known*. What capacities will be required in humans to deal with such unknown problems and to overcome our tendencies to deal with the attendant anxieties by denial, rationalization and passive resignation?

Those anxieties come in two forms: what we have called *survival anxiety* or the recognition we must do something if we are to survive, and *learning anxiety* or the fear we may not be able to learn what we need to do to survive (Schein & Schein, 2019).

The paradox of actively managing the learning process is whether it is better to heighten survival anxiety – scare ourselves so much that we finally take some sort of action – or to identify the barriers to learning, to reduce our learning anxiety and get to work on some adaptive learning efforts.

Adaptive learning efforts do not specify the problem that we are trying to solve in very precise terms (such as, for example, reducing the amount of plastic in the ocean), but recognize that from our efforts to do something specific that we can already do, we learn more about the as yet unknown problems that we may face tomorrow.

One of the most profound conclusions these authors reach is that such adaptive learning begins with ourselves, with our own capacity to see beyond our immediate context and grasp through our relationships with others the broader perspective that is needed for this new learning. As the authors point out, our incredible brains give all of us the capacity for this broader learning, but growing up within a given culture with a given language also predetermines what we learn and how we learn, leading to a second paradoxical issue of how to proceed.

If we accept that culture largely determines what we see, how we interpret it, what values and meanings we attach to things, our emotional responses to our experience, and, in the end, our actions, how can we, as fish, not only discover the water that we swim in, but transform that water into something new and better? It would seem that the key to such learning is to expose ourselves to different cultures, and jump into new waters either by travelling and learning new languages or by exploring more deeply the variation in the water of our own fish tank by systematically exploring the subcultures that exist in our own society. Or preferably do both.

These points raise the whole issue of who can best benefit from this deep dive into an uncertain future, this exquisitely detailed analysis of what is really going on. Read this as a traveller, let the many landscapes broaden your thinking rather than leading you to a sudden insight, a moment for understanding, and a call to action. You won't find such clarity, but you will

develop a much broader perspective which will enable you to see more clearly and enable you to evolve more alternatives for your own action.

It is tempting to go to the usual prescription that this book is of special importance for leaders. In our culture we have been taught that power and information, and therefore the capacity to act, sits at the top of the organization, and we have been taught that people who sit at the top of organizations should be thought of as leaders and should, therefore, be the initiators of the kind of adaptive changes we need. The reality in most organizations is that the heads are more caretakers, administrators, and managers.

If we define *leadership as creating something new and better*, then we discover that leadership can, does, and should occur all through the organization, and that the most important thing for people at the top to do is to create a climate and a context for personal growth to flourish at all levels, to make it possible for everyone in the organization and in society more broadly to begin their personal learning journey to discover something new and better. In order to create something new and better, *we all must learn* to become more conscious of ourselves, of our relationships, how we work in groups, and how our existing culture controls our lives. Our formal leaders should help us do this.

Paradoxically what we see in Western culture, particularly in the US culture which is fundamentally built around rugged individualism and competition, is people in positions of power actually creating the conditions that *undermine learning* by creating work climates that make it unsafe for people to speak truth to power, to take time out for reflection, and to improve the immediate world they live in.

We find in many of our organizations that maintaining distant professional relationships, staying in one's role, is the cultural ideal, even as we find that individualistic competition creates toxic relationships and pathological group processes. To break out of this mindset will require personal learning throughout society, otherwise the culture will not evolve to deal with the unexpected learning challenges that we face.

The good news is that as humans we all have the capacities and competencies that this book lays out as being necessary for gradual cultural evolution to occur. The other good news, based on my experience of observing various kinds of managers and leaders for over 60 years, is that we have seen such learning leaders throughout history creating new kinds of organization, new political processes, and new values around which to build relationships.

We see such learning leaders in all kinds of organizations today, especially in the arts and other non-profit organizations, but many of them have to constantly fight the cultural forces that encourage regression to the safety of individualistic, competitive hierarchy. In all such cases the individual insights that enabled them to do something new and better came from cross-cultural experiences that allowed them to see and analyse the water they were swimming in as captive fishes. We labelled this “Humble leadership: the power of relationships, openness and trust” (Schein & Schein, 2018) and argued, as this book does, that the winds of change are blowing more strongly than ever within young organizations and with the new generations that bring new values and perspectives to work.

In every sense this book is a wake-up call to all of us to begin our personal learning journeys to broaden our perspective, to build more collaborative relationships, to get used to the new learning processes that will have to develop. When I taught a course at MIT called “Managing planned change”, I asked all students to make a *personal change* by the end of the semester, and in various project groups to make a *change in their university and urban environment*. To my amazement, all the individuals and all the groups were successful in making changes, but perhaps the most significant learning for all of us was discovering how the interplay between the personal change issues and the group process change issues educated each other. We discovered how our own personal resistance to change usefully informed and provided empathy for the people whom we were trying to change in our group project.

So my advice to readers of this book is to begin with both some

intention to enlarge your own perspective through travelling, reading, becoming observant and reflective, and start experimenting a bit with making your relationships more personal and illuminating. The level of culture change that will be required to save the planet and us in it will, in the end, depend on each of us starting such learning processes.

Edgar H. Schein
Sloan Fellows Professor of Management Emeritus
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About IFF

International Futures Forum (IFF) is a non-profit organization established to support a transformative response to complex and confounding challenges and to restore the capacity for effective action in today's powerful times.

At the heart of IFF is a deeply informed inter-disciplinary and international network of individuals from a range of backgrounds covering a wide range of diverse perspectives, countries and disciplines. The group meets as a learning community as often as possible, including in plenary session. And it seeks to apply its learning in practice.

IFF takes on complex, seemingly intractable issues – notably in the arenas of health, learning, governance and enterprise – where paradox, ambiguity and complexity characterize the landscape, where rapid change means yesterday's solution no longer works, where long-term needs require a long-term logic and where only genuine innovation has any chance of success.

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About the Authors

Maureen O'Hara PhD is Professor of Psychology, National University, USA; President Emerita, Saybrook University, San Francisco; and Director, International Futures Forum-US. She is a licensed psychotherapist in practice for over three decades and worked closely with Carl R. Rogers in La Jolla, California - facilitating encounter groups, large group events and training psychotherapists in many countries. Her recent work explores the present and potential future impacts of global cultural shifts on psychological development and emotional wellbeing. Books include *Em busca da vida*, with C.R. Rogers, J.K. Wood and A. Fonseca (Summus, 1983); *Ten Things To Do In A Conceptual Emergency*, with G. Leicester (Triarchy, 2009); and the *Handbook of Person-Centered Psychotherapy and Counselling* with M. Cooper, P. Schmid and G. Wyatt (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). She is married to Robert Lucas with whom she resides in Carlsbad, California, spending as much time as they can with family in Yorkshire and IFF colleagues at the Boathouse, Aberdour.

Graham Leicester is Director of International Futures Forum. IFF's mission is to support a transformative response to the challenges of the times. Graham previously ran Scotland's leading think tank, the Scottish Council Foundation, founded in 1997. From 1984-1995 he served as a diplomat in HM Diplomatic Service, specializing in China (he speaks Mandarin Chinese) and the EU. Between 1995 and 1997 he was senior research fellow with the Constitution Unit at University College London. He has also worked as a freelance professional cellist, including with the BBC Concert Orchestra. He has a strong interest in governance, innovation and education, is a senior adviser to the British Council on those issues, and has previously worked with OECD, the World Bank Institute and other agencies on the themes of governance in a knowledge society and the governance of the long term.

In his 1969 essay, *The World of Tomorrow and the Person of Tomorrow*, the psychologist Carl Rogers looked ahead to the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world we inhabit today. He suggested that living in such a world would require a whole new set of competencies – demonstrated already by the ‘persons of tomorrow’ he saw around him even then.

In *Dancing at the Edge*, Maureen O’Hara and Graham Leicester pick up the thread fifty years on. Drawing on extensive research and their own wide experience, they map the ‘powerful times’ in which we live, the 21st-century competencies required to thrive in this complexity and how to discover and develop them in practice. They identify:

- Three emergencies: real, conceptual and existential
- Three potential responses: denial, collapse and transformation
- Three literacies: psychological, cultural and epistemic

These literacies – or ways of reading the landscape – open the door to our 21st-century competencies, which are innate, relational, and will develop through practice in a supportive organizational or social setting.

The picture that emerges is complex but remarkably clear and surprisingly hopeful – even exhilarating. Organizations of every sort from businesses to schools and healthcare, from government bodies to NGOs, can create the conditions, offer the support and provide the context within which engaged, aware, passionate and compassionate people can rise above denial and take on the challenges of today’s powerful times.

This is a handbook for anyone aspiring to develop their 21st-century competencies and for any organization hoping to cultivate the persons of tomorrow in its midst.

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Artwork by Jennifer Williams



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