

DANCING AT THE EDGE

Competence, Culture and
Organization in the 21st Century

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to the latest book from
IFF (International Futures Forum).

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INTRODUCTION: PERSONS OF TOMORROW

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.*

The Second Coming – W B Yeats (1920)

*Hold tight, hold tight, we must insist that the world
is what we have always taken it to be.*

The Family Reunion – T S Eliot (1939)

We do not solve our problems, we outgrow them.

Collected Works – C G Jung (1938)

The World of Tomorrow

IN a famous essay in 1980, *The World of Tomorrow and the Person of Tomorrow*, the psychologist Carl Rogers, an American who had worked with groups all over the world, surveyed a rapidly changing landscape at home and abroad and contemplated the future.¹ As the upheavals of the 1960s played out in diverse ways and diverse settings – the beginnings of environmental awareness, social movements advocating equality of gender and race, protests against the seemingly endless war in South East Asia, a revolution in popular culture – Rogers was not the only one to sense a dramatic shift in the culture and the struggling emergence of a new world.

While others feared the loosening of cultural constraint and actively worked to suppress the freedom and confusion that ensued, Rogers chose to see this as a creative moment, a moment of growth and possibility. He heard people reaching for new ways

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of responding to the challenges of the times that were not merely new applications of old solutions but new ways of being. What, he wondered, would the world of tomorrow look like? What kinds of challenges would it pose to humanity? What kinds of capacities would the crises and opportunities of the future require of us and help us to develop? What, in other words, might we expect of ‘persons of tomorrow’?

“I have an uneasy feeling about this chapter,” he wrote. “In some vague way I believe that what I am saying here will some day be fleshed out much more fully, either by me or someone else.”

He was right. This book is our attempt to explore, examine and provide our best answers to the critical questions Rogers was asking. Because the challenges, the turbulence, the world turned upside down that he envisaged have indeed come to pass.

The world of tomorrow is with us today. It is a confusing, complex, fast-changing and radically interconnected place. The forces of suppression and denial are as active as they were in Rogers’s day, but now play out against a backdrop narrative of economic, social and even planetary decline. As Chapter 1 describes, we live in powerful times.

So it is more vital than ever that the persons of tomorrow in our midst and in ourselves are now encouraged, supported and developed.

There will certainly be technological and intellectual breakthroughs in the coming years to point the way and aid us out of our present predicament. We still need and value the technical competencies that came to dominate the 20th century. But in any scenario it will continue to fall to people to turn insight into action and to work within existing entrenched systems to shift them in a more hopeful direction. We will need to pay a lot more attention to the additional personal competencies that shift will require. Rogers’s thirty-year-old question has assumed a new urgency. How can we develop persons of tomorrow, expressing 21st-century competencies?

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Culture and Competence

THE first part of this book examines the contemporary context in which we must make good on the potential that Rogers saw in persons of tomorrow. That includes the nature of the challenges we face, but also the pattern of cultural assumptions we make about competence and personal development generally. Because they now lie so deep in the culture, these assumptions can often go unseen.

They too must be re-examined. Competence is culturally determined. What works in one culture fails in another. Cultures and cultural stories provide templates for what it is to be successful in a particular society, to be accomplished, to live a successful life. Rogers was right to see the competencies of persons of tomorrow coming to prominence in parallel with the emergence of a ‘world of tomorrow.’

We will find it difficult to discover and nurture 21st-century competencies if we remain in thrall to the cultural story about competence that dominates today. That story suggests, among other things, that competence:

- is a ‘thing’; a quality of the individual
- can be taught or trained to different levels by following an appropriate curriculum
- can be tested, measured and graded in the abstract
- will ultimately win an economic return both for the competent individual and his or her organization or nation

This used to be a predominantly Western story. But, carried by powerful institutions and incentives – not to mention the meta-system of global capitalism – it has now become prevalent across the globe.

It has certainly enabled a mastery of specialist competencies to date that has been hugely impressive and is to be admired. But it has become all but impossible within this context to recognize or

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develop the additional 21st-century competencies we now need to thrive in the world we have created.

Three shifts in the culture are therefore critical in our view. The first is to recognize, as the OECD did in a recent five-year study of “key competencies for the 21st century,” that today we must understand competence not as abstract achievement but as “the ability to meet important challenges in life in a complex world.”²

We endorse that definition. It follows that you cannot measure or assess 21st-century competencies in the abstract. You can only see them as a whole and in action. They can be demonstrated in, and inferred from, successful performance in complex situations in the real world. They cannot be tested and graded by written examination.

The second shift is equally fundamental. In the operating conditions of the 21st century it is impossible to be competent alone. Competence is a function of culture, which is a function of relationship. This is not only a plea for attention to teamwork, collaboration and other competencies relating to an individual’s performance in group settings. It is a deeper acknowledgment that we create our own lives in a pattern of relationship with other lives, and always have done.³

Technical competence can be mastered alone. But its application foregrounds relationship – the context of human systems and cultures within which that competence needs to be exercised. The growing interest in qualities like empathy, compassion and emotional intelligence speaks to this dawning recognition in today’s hyper-connected world. Just like those qualities, 21st-century competencies cannot be observed or exercised except in relationship with other people.

Third, 21st-century competencies are qualities of persons as a whole. Becoming a person of tomorrow is not like assembling the parts of a machine. It is difficult to be compassionate, for example, without at the same time showing a capacity for empathy, humility and other qualities. Thus the expression

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of 21st-century competencies will fly in the face of a dominant culture that suggests competencies can be distinguished one from another, developed in isolation, and mastered one stage at a time.

We suggest instead that these competencies are innate capacities in any human system (individual or collective): they simply require the right enabling conditions, settings, life experiences and so on to be called forth and developed through practice.

In other words, we understand persons of tomorrow as having certain observable attributes and qualities which might then be expressed in practice as identifiable competence – always in the sense of ‘the ability to meet important challenges in life in a complex world.’

By analogy, a person may have the personal quality or capacity of innate musicality. If that personal quality is matched with the enabling conditions to call it forth in practice (an instrument, a mentor, some people to play with, etc) then a competence can be developed, which can over time advance to the state of mastery.

In Chapter 3 we explore the late 20th-century culture of the neurotic pursuit of competence. In its place we come down firmly in favor of an earlier expression in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948: “the full development of the human personality.” We reject (as Maslow himself did) the notion of a ‘hierarchy of needs’: one does not have to achieve shelter in order to graduate to a capacity for love. So it is with the 21st-century competencies: they are already part of our rich human repertoire of responses, but undervalued, underestimated and so underdeveloped in our late modern culture.

Beyond the Limitations of 20th-Century Competence

NONE of this book is intended to decry the value of what we might call ‘20th-century competencies.’ The advances we have made and the structures of education, socialization, professional training and accreditation we have put in place to replicate them at scale have been spectacular. We are not suggesting that the 21st-century

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surgeon, for example, or any other professional, manager or specialist, can dispense with a thorough technical grounding.

What we are saying is that such competencies are no longer sufficient. Once we move from situations that are complicated – such as nuclear engineering – to those that are complex – such as coping with the aftermath of the tsunami that hit the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan – another level of competence is required.

We applaud the impact of Atul Gawande's *The Checklist Manifesto: How to get things right* in reducing error in complex technical processes: it certainly helps to prevent removing the wrong limb in an operating theatre.⁴ But the healthcare professional about to engage in a grown-up conversation with a patient about whether to intervene or not towards the end of life needs more than a friendly algorithm to run through.

Simply extrapolating our 20th-century competence, and the culture that honors it, into these more complex areas is unlikely to be effective, may be actively counter-productive, and closes off the opportunity to develop the 21st-century competencies we all already possess (to some degree).

Complex problems involving other human beings have no simple answers. They call for judgment, experience, empathy, personal investment, even wisdom – the capacities of whole persons.

Whilst we have explored the numerous analyses, reports and lists of 21st-century skills, knowledge, competencies, capacities and attributes compiled by others, we have chosen to privilege in our own work the observation of people displaying 21st-century competence in practice.

We find that people who are thriving in the contemporary world, who give us the sense of having it all together and being able to act effectively and with good spirit in challenging circumstances, have some identifiable characteristics in common, even though they are all manifestly themselves – unique and original. They are the people already among us who inhabit

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the complex and messy problems of the 21st century in a more expansive way than their colleagues.

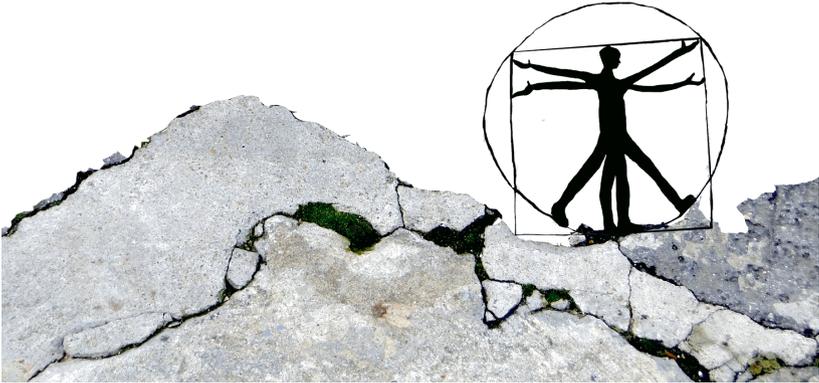
They do not reduce such problems to the scale of the tools available to them, nor do they hide behind those tools when they know they are partial and inadequate. They are less concerned with ‘doing the right thing’ according to standard procedure than they are with really doing the right thing in the moment, in specific cases, with the individuals involved at the time. In a disciplined yet engaging way they are always pushing boundaries, including their own. They dance at the edge.

It is a risky position to take in today’s culture. But there is always a sneaking admiration for such people from their more conventional colleagues. These people seem to find it easy – natural in fact – to take a larger, broader, more holistic, more generous, more all-encompassing, altogether bigger view of any circumstance. They have enough identity and value security to be flexible in their actions and responses to encounters with the world while maintaining a reliable ethical stance. They relate to other people in ways that welcome and honor the dignity and possibilities of otherness. They chafe against short-term fixes and ‘good enough’ responses. They energize others with their vision, their aspiration and their hope.

What is it about such people that enables them to be this way in the face of today’s challenges? We do not believe the qualities they display are exceptional. They are innate human capacities that we all possess but which some have managed to develop and express better than others.

Sadly most of us have been brought up and taught to be ‘competent’ in a dominant culture that has neither appreciated, encouraged nor valued their expression. But for others, the setting they have found themselves in, or the developmental path of their life experience, has put them in circumstances where these 21st-century competencies have been evoked. Some have undertaken dedicated training to enhance their natural capacity.

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21st-Century Competencies

WITH this frame in mind, the second part of this book elaborates on the qualities, capacities, characteristics and competencies we observe in persons of tomorrow. We will still need to master the technical competencies of the 20th century. But in order to put those competencies to use, to use them wisely and to develop their further potential, we will also need to extend our range.

We take as an organizing framework the four pillars of learning in Jacques Delors's UNESCO report on education for the 21st century, *Learning: The treasure within*.⁵ They are:

- learning to be
- learning to be together
- learning to know
- learning to do

The later chapters in this book explore these four dimensions of 21st-century learning. They describe the qualities of being displayed by persons of tomorrow, clustered under the themes of humility, balance and faith in the future. They investigate the essential capacities needed to operate in, and to facilitate,

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dynamic group situations and work with a high degree of cultural awareness – being together. There is a chapter on ways of knowing embraced by persons of tomorrow: how to expand our capacity to make sense of a complex and dynamic world whilst simultaneously acknowledging its enduring wonder and mystery.

The final chapters turn to action: learning to do. They explore both the new organizational forms that persons of tomorrow are shaping and being shaped by, and the kinds of action learning – wise initiative – that will help to develop the 21st-century competencies in practice.

Underpinning all of these suggestions is one other fundamental capacity, described in Chapter 4: ‘psychological literacy.’ This is like a threshold competence: without it the awakening and development of the other 21st-century competencies is very difficult, if not impossible. Essentially it involves a capacity to read one’s own psychological response to challenge and to become master of that response rather than its victim.

Challenge, overwhelm and confusion are frequent operating conditions in today’s world and the default psychological defense in these circumstances is denial. It is an automatic response, protective of the psyche and its need for stability. But denial is not a learning stance – and unless we can get beyond it the deeper resources we all possess are never called into play. Hence the fundamental importance of the so-called ‘double task’: to be able to act and reflect on one’s actions *at the same time*. At the level of recognizing denial and actively trying on other psychological responses for size, we call this ‘psychological literacy.’

This same facility also relates to culture and the dynamics of groups. The dominant culture today is hardly conducive to, and in many cases actively resists, the qualities and capacities outlined in the pages that follow. These capacities imply a culture of their own – more open, receptive, enabling. But if we are to be able to operate at the level of cultural change, we must first be able to see the culture we are in. This is another version of the double task –

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to be able to act and reflect on the cultural implications of one's actions at the same time. Persons of tomorrow and the culture of tomorrow will grow in parallel, through what – following Aftab Omer – we call 'cultural leadership.'⁶

At an individual level the demonstration and development of the 21st-century competencies in many settings will be seen as counter-cultural. Like the football player who stops to tend an injured colleague while the opposition play on and score. Or the teacher who encourages his pupils to ask better questions rather than parrot the required answers. Or the politician who asks her officials to organize a learning journey for her to get a better feel for a messy situation rather than give her a set of statistics to silence the opposition. These are all small acts of cultural leadership, eroding the dominant culture and demonstrating the possibility of working from different assumptions.

These examples are deliberately low-risk and personal: individuals committing small acts of creative transgression against the norm, choosing in those moments to privilege other values than those typically favored by the dominant culture. But it is only a matter of degree that separates these acts from more intentional cultural leadership, interventions deliberately made – in public – to shift the culture.

It is a dangerous role. Established cultures fight back. Rules, especially unwritten ones, are not there to be broken. It is a particular tragedy to see so little willingness to stretch those boundaries in the realm of political leadership. There we find exceptional figures like Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel and Aung San Suu Kyi, ready to stand for a more expansive culture and lead a people towards their vision. They outflank their opponents by playing a bigger game, one that resonates with our better selves. But for the most part those we place in positions of political leadership neglect the potential to use that platform for cultural leadership. They insist on playing the game at a lower level of development and aspiration, reinforcing a dominant culture that keeps our higher potentials in check.

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Even if not cut out for cultural leadership on that scale, at the very least the person of tomorrow must have a high degree of cultural literacy: an ability to read and sense a culture, or a group, and to understand how far it might be willing to move. That literacy may help to identify a suitable existing culture in which to grow. Or it will help to develop such a culture through thoughtful, considered acts of creative transgression. And if practised at a large enough scale or for high enough stakes, it will catalyze the evolution of the culture as a whole.

Recognizing the 21st-Century Competencies in Practice

FOR many years now we have been aware that the modern world is both driving us crazy (literally: there is a global epidemic of mental illness and mental distress⁷), and that it is throwing up challenges that we are struggling to address with our current levels of competence. Much of our practical work during these years has been in supporting people to take on complex, messy, seemingly intractable problems – in health, education, community development, governance, enterprise, the arts – wherever they show up. That work has allowed us to observe at first hand the competencies that make a difference in today’s world and ways in which they can be encouraged and developed.⁸ The competencies teased out and developed in the second part of this book are in part derived from that extensive practice.

At the same time we have also been looking for people more at home and more effective in the “blooming, buzzing confusion” of the 21st century: persons of tomorrow expressing 21st-century competencies.

Expecting to find these capacities in today’s successful leaders, we have actively shadowed a number of chief executives in different sectors to discover both the secrets of their mastery and how they came by them. The results are reported in Chapter 4. These encounters helped us realize that our established leaders are just as likely to be operating ‘in over their heads’ as we are.

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However we did learn that some settings are more conducive to the demonstration of 21st-century competencies than others, and therefore that leader and organizational setting develop together. That too is counter-cultural for a leadership development industry that thrives on specialist programs, awaydays, retreats and other processes based on the unspoken assumption that it is the leader who shapes the organization and that improving the competencies of the former will inevitably impact the latter.

We also saw some highly impressive individuals in action. And began to realize that we had seen the 21st-century qualities they displayed in others we have worked with below chief executive level in their organizations: headteachers, public service directors, nursing managers, middle-ranking officials and countless others. These are people with enough authority in their roles to try something different, but not so much as to be afraid to do so. Vignettes from their practice are dotted through this narrative.

It has been tempting to offer more prominent and well-known examples. The truth is they are few and far between. And high-profile cultural leaders will inevitably be viewed with ambivalence as they seek to play out on a public stage the impossible balancing act of being hospice worker for the dying culture and midwife for the new. They cannot help but disappoint one side or the other some of the time.

But it seems to us that during the writing of this book one prominent world figure has been playing out before us the ups and downs, the struggles and the paradoxes, of being a person of tomorrow in today's world. He is U.S. President, Barack Obama. If only to root the concepts we outline in this book in some kind of shared experience, therefore, we reference Obama as an example of what we are talking about and will refer to him from time to time through this text.

This is a risk on two levels. First, it may put off half our readers. But believe us when we say we are not making a political point,

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simply seeking to bring to life by reference to a common source some of the capacities we describe.

Second, like so many before him, Obama may fall from grace. If he is anything like the rest of us, he surely has feet of clay – and these will be exposed at some point, apparently making laughable any claim to 21st-century capacities.

That is the fatal flaw in many books of this type – like the companies in Jim Collins's *Good to Great* that became not so great after publication.⁹ But in the end, as our own small act of cultural leadership, we believe we must recognize 21st-century competencies wherever they show up, especially in such a public figure as Obama.

As evidence, think back to January 2011 and the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords at a 'meet the people' event outside a supermarket in Tucson. The attack, in which six people died and Giffords was seriously injured, shocked America. Some saw it as the inevitable outcome of a politics become intolerant and 'uncivil.' The Republican politician Sarah Palin, then widely seen as contemplating a Presidential bid herself, was vilified for having shown Giffords caught in the crosshairs of a rifle sight as a campaign 'target.' She attempted to address the damage with a speech mourning the dead, but vigorously defending free speech and forthright debate as key American virtues.

It fell to Obama in his public role to address the memorial service for the dead. With the eyes of the world and of a shattered local community watching, how would he respond? It was a test of competence at a high level, way beyond politics. Visibly emotional, yet steadfast, he addressed the service as a cultural leader. He ministered to a cultural wound. He remembered the dead – personally, individually, as if they had each been his neighbor. He praised those who had acted swiftly and selflessly to limit the slaughter – moving the audience to whooping like a campaign rally.

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And he used the occasion, this opening in the culture, to call on everyone to reflect on how we live our own lives: to “expand our moral imaginations,” “sharpen our instincts for empathy” and remember that “what matters is not wealth, or status, or power, or fame – but rather, how well we have loved.”

It is a simple message. Not original by any means. Palin had played with some of the same sentiment. But her intent was clearly political. Obama was operating at another level, and calling on our better selves to join him there. It was evocative – a conscious rising to the occasion, calling forth resources in his audience by authentically demonstrating them himself.

This is setting the bar high. But we can see in this performance some of the common characteristics we have observed in many others in more humdrum, less public, settings. There is a cultural fluency evident in Obama’s playing back and forth across domains of family, preacher and politician, local friend and national leader. That is perhaps associated in his case with being – like so many 21st-century persons – the product of a hybrid culture himself. We see an emotional maturity, a lack of fear in dealing with powerful emotions and naming them in public. And a humility in his identification with everyman that would sound false in many others.

This public address was a masterclass in 21st-century competencies, and widely recognized as such. As one of the hard-bitten CBS news commentators who was present put it: “I was sitting there and I realized, ‘This guy might be a great man.’ I had forgotten about that.”

Start Where You Are

THIS book sums up our learning from many years’ observing and working with persons of tomorrow, admiring their competence and facility and wondering how to help make a large enough dent in the culture to allow more such practice to flourish. We hope

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our writing it, and more particularly your reading it, will help to progress that goal.

But the truth is that our culture will shift and the 21st-century competencies will be developed only through practice. You cannot learn to play the cello by reading a book. And whilst books of advice can help, you will not get fit unless you go through the process of exercise. The 21st-century competencies are like that. So the real challenge for all of us is to begin to develop our capacity as persons of tomorrow wherever we are, working with whomever we are working with, in whatever setting we find ourselves in today.

Naturally there are places, programs, support networks, specific courses and the like that may well have a role to play. That would be like going to the gym. But better still if you can incorporate this 'exercise' into your normal day-to-day working life. In the end, individual and setting must evolve and develop together. It is a harder road, but we believe ultimately more fulfilling and more impactful, if we are able to bring our 21st-century selves to work and grow a new culture around us whilst we are there.

The qualities and competencies outlined in this book should give us all we need to do that. We all have it in us to become persons of tomorrow, to rise above denial, and to take on the challenges of today's powerful times.

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