

# DANCING AT THE EDGE

Competence, Culture and  
Organization in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

SECOND EDITION

with a foreword by Ed Schein

**\*\*Introduction Only\*\***

Maureen O'Hara  
Graham Leicester



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in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Second Edition

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Graham Leicester

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**Artwork by Jennifer Williams**

**Jennifer Williams is critically acclaimed at making hand-made books, cut-outs, photographs, illustrations, prints and puppets. She is a trustee and member of International Futures Forum and for 31 years directed the Centre for Creative Communities.**

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# Contents

RESPONSES to <i>Dancing at the Edge</i> .....	v
FOREWORD – Edgar H. Schein.....	1
PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION .....	7
INTRODUCTION: Persons of Tomorrow .....	11
The World of Tomorrow.....	11
Three Emergencies .....	12
Culture and Competence.....	14
Beyond the Limitations of 20 <sup>th</sup> -Century Competence.....	17
21 <sup>st</sup> -Century Competencies .....	20
Recognizing 21 <sup>st</sup> -Century Competencies in Practice.....	23
Start Where You Are .....	28
PART ONE: THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT .....	31
CHAPTER 1: Powerful Times .....	33
Powerful Times Foretold .....	33
Disturbing the Psychosphere .....	37
Culture Matters .....	41
Stay Hungry, Stay Foolish, Don't Settle.....	44
CHAPTER 2: Growing with the Times .....	49
Defensive Denial .....	49
The Growth Response.....	52

How We Grow .....	53
Getting Beyond Defensive Denial.....	56
CHAPTER 3: Competence in the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century.....	61
The Full Development of the Human Personality.....	61
The Neurotic Pursuit of Competence.....	62
Nudging Ourselves to Competence .....	66
There Is No Hierarchy of Needs.....	69
Defining Competence.....	73
PART TWO: 21 <sup>ST</sup> -CENTURY COMPETENCIES .....	75
CHAPTER 4: Enabling Conditions for 21 <sup>st</sup> -Century Competence.....	77
Three Literacies: Psychological, Cultural and Epistemic..	77
Competence in Practice .....	80
Enabling Conditions .....	83
CHAPTER 5: Being a Person of Tomorrow.....	87
Four Pillars of Learning.....	87
Being.....	88
Humility.....	90
Balance .....	94
Faith in the Future.....	96
CHAPTER 6: Cultural Leadership and the Person of Tomorrow.....	99
Being Together.....	99
The Importance of Culture .....	102
Cultural Literacy .....	103

Navigating the Cultural Landscape .....	107
Cultural Leadership .....	109
Changing Cultures.....	111
CHAPTER 7: Knowing Like a Person of Tomorrow.....	115
The Enlightenment and Beyond.....	115
Containing Multitudes.....	116
Expanding Our Ways of Knowing .....	118
Knowing and Feeling .....	120
Knowledge in Motion .....	122
Maps and Compasses .....	124
CHAPTER 8: Organizing Persons of Tomorrow .....	127
The Setting: Places To Grow .....	127
The Promise of Adhocracy.....	128
And Its Dangers .....	130
The Producer.....	132
Robust Adhocracy .....	134
Money at the Margins.....	138
CHAPTER 9: Persons of Tomorrow in Action .....	141
Becoming Through Doing.....	141
What Kind of Action? .....	144
Messy and Complex .....	144
Hopeful and Wise .....	146
Patient and Reflective.....	148
The Master of Go .....	149
Theatres for Action Learning.....	151
Rehearsal Spaces .....	153

CHAPTER 10: Practical Hope .....	157
Start Where You Are.....	157
Inspiration .....	159
Prompts.....	161
Form A Creative Integrity .....	162
Reflect and Learn .....	163
Never Forget the Bigger Game .....	165
CHAPTER 11: Conclusion .....	167
Why Last Chapters Disappoint .....	167
Blowing An Uncertain Trumpet .....	168
REFERENCES.....	171
NOTES .....	179
INDEX .....	185



## RESPONSES to *Dancing at the Edge*

*We want to change the world. But that begins with ourselves. Often our focus is almost incessantly outward with what is wrong out there, without the corresponding reflection upon and assessment of our own skills, attitudes and beliefs. To do such reflection and assessment we need the set of concepts in this book, exquisitely organized around the important concept of 'The Person of Tomorrow'. That person could be you.*

Bob Horn, Visiting Scholar in the Human Sciences and  
Technology Advanced Research Institute (H-STAR) at Stanford  
University and CEO, MacroVU Inc.

*For anyone feeling the challenge of today's world and struggling to find their feet amidst the complexity, this is a book to savour and treasure. Drawing on long experience, wide research and deep reflection the authors build on the simple statement that 'the first step is awareness' to take us on a journey of deepening our inherent capacities to meet the world through transformative growth and learning in action. It is refreshing and valuable to find a book that recognises the importance of bringing our whole complex human capacity to the task of systems transition, renewal and regeneration. We can look for patterns and design pathways. But it is always persons, working together, who make the journey to the third horizon. If we want to shift the culture, we have to do something counter-cultural, we have to dance at the edge. Take this book with you.*

Bill Sharpe, author, *Three Horizons: The patterning of hope*

*As a set of guidelines to how we should think and act in powerful and liquid times, this is an excellent start, ably assisted by the distinctive artwork of Jennifer Williams that sets a questioning tone, and the handsome production values of Triarchy Press.*

Michael Marien, Global Foresight Books

## *Dancing at the Edge*

*Leadership Development is an industry and like all industries it has its own marketing strategies. One is coming up with fancy labels and new ideas rather than considering real need. But does it help organizations solve their challenges to jump on the next bandwagon leadership approach? Or are we in the innovation trap of leadership and people development – not taking care of what is proven and still valuable to apply, to be combined with additional approaches, methods and tools.*

*The work of Leicester and O'Hara is different. It provides an orientation to the field and is based on solid philosophical and historical thinking. It makes you think and reflect and it is a good starting point for coping with the variety of challenges emerging in today's environment. I like the book because it makes me think and it encourages me to take these ideas as a starting point for all my actions in my professional environment. Especially the idea of transitioning from a socialized mind to a self-transforming mind, which has become the compass/quest for all my thoughts and actions.*

*The book in three words: inspiring, motivating, enabling.*

**Peter Spannagl, Global Talent and Inclusion, Bayer**

*In business today there is a permeating sense that the toolbox of management practices developed over the last 50 years is not enough to equip leaders to navigate these complex times and deliver sustainable results. There is much discussion and literature supporting the need for more transformational leaders, yet very little practical advice on how to develop these abilities. This is where I see the work of Leicester and O'Hara making a profound contribution to the next level of leadership development. Exploration of the Psychological, Cultural and Epistemic literacies provides a blueprint for individuals to grow the competencies needed to face the challenges of today and tomorrow in an adaptive manner. This book gives me hope that through a deeper connection with our innate humanism and having the courage to work at the edge of our abilities we can collectively create a better future for all humanity.*

**Susan Francis, Leadership Development Consultant**

*Dancing at the Edge* is a comprehensive examination of the times we live in – straddling two paradigms of consciousness, one losing credibility ever more rapidly while a new one is being born but is not yet ready to be embraced by the masses. The authors explore the challenges facing any of us who are trying to midwife this new paradigm, which they call “persons of tomorrow”. I love one quote they cite from a Native American woman dealing with the vanishing of the buffalo, which was at the heart of her people’s culture: “I am trying to live a life I do not understand.” Many people might say something like this today. If you see yourself as a leader of change, read this book!

John Renesch, author, *The Great Growing Up*

For those looking for hope in this increasingly perilous century, this book points helpfully inward to ourselves. It challenges us to see and to be among the sturdy individuals whose balanced wisdom, humility and faith in the future can lead us safely, ‘dancing at the edge’ of human survival.

Elsa Porter, Fellow of the US National Academy of Public Administration

A life-enhancing exploration of the new work to which we are now called: out-growing modernity by practising the art of becoming self-transcending persons committed to nurturing the emergence of self-transcending cultures. A book to be read, digested and embodied.

Ruben Nelson, Executive Director, Foresight Canada

This is the kind of book that is deceptively thin, since it is so dense with meaning that you need to pause every 3-5 pages to digest what you read. Graham Leicester and Maureen O’Hara have partnered seamlessly to create a mind-expanding book that conveys both a sense of urgency for what our world and societies are experiencing, and a sense of hope for what is possible for each one of us to do. I recommend the book wholeheartedly and encourage you to find out about the work of International Futures Forum and get involved!

Elina Koussis, Leadership Development Learning Leader

## *Dancing at the Edge*

*Humanity is now clearly at the 'edge of chaos' – a place of danger and potential, where we are given the chance to grow up and unfold our highest potential and creativity to unleash a transformative response. I have been blessed to be nourished by the wisdom circle that is the International Futures Forum for over a decade now. This 2nd edition of the insightful classic **Dancing at the Edge** could not be released at a more timely moment. Read it, reflect on each chapter, start conversations about it with your neighbour, in your community or at work. From such conversations and the actions that follow we will prove C.G. Jung right: "we don't solve our problems, we outgrow them". Humanity is now invited to step into mature membership of the community of life. Maureen and Graham have created a wonderful provocation that might help us to dance our way out of this mess and actively choose a regenerative future for all.*

*Daniel Christian Wahl, author, **Designing Regenerative Cultures***

*Maureen and Graham have tuned up the dance steps on how to navigate our way in this complex and fascinating world. Their steps include a wonderfully comprehensive variety of frameworks and ideas, so you can combine set pieces with a bit of improv.*

*I have bought many copies of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition and people have found it an enlightening resource on how to be a person of tomorrow, today! Let's expand the dance floor and create a tomorrow that works for each and all. I often read 300-page books and find they could have been a 10-page article. **Dancing at the Edge** feels like a 150-page book that could easily have been double that length. Kudos to Graham and Maureen for condensing so much wisdom in this wonderful small book.*

*Douglas O'Loughlin, PhD, Civil Service College Institute of Leadership and Organisation Development, Singapore*

*Much has already been said about competence in the age of complexity. This book profoundly reweaves the context of the inquiry on competence with imagination and empathy for how whole persons and whole systems can transform and flourish. Clarity, conciseness and complexity, all inside 200 pages!*

*Aftab Omer, President, Meridian University*

*The most thoughtful leaders on the frontlines of philanthropy and impact investing know that the stakes are going up even as “best” practices are not keeping up. This thoughtful book challenges those seeking transformative, systems change to begin close in: by asking ourselves how we must change to meet the world’s growing complexity. Many have asked this question, but few have addressed it as generatively and creatively as O’Hara and Leicester. **Dancing at the Edge** will expand your sense both of what is necessary and what is possible.*

Katherine Fulton, co-founder, Monitor Institute

*The first edition of **Dancing at the Edge** became my guide – it helped me navigate through the uncertainty of our times, it gave me validation for some of the choices I had made and the way I was living, and it helped me find a wider community of other people who were also ‘dancing at the edge’. There is a lot of wisdom in this text, as with so much of the International Futures Forum’s work. Much of the content in the book is ahead of its time, but I can assure you if you read this now you will be grateful for it for many years to come, and will continue to find it a relevant and reassuring compass.*

Cassie Robinson, Head of Digital Grant Making at  
The National Lottery Community Fund and  
Co-founder of the Point People

*This extraordinary book offers that most precious commodity: hope. For the policymaker struggling with complexity and mess, we learn that we already have everything we need to take effective action and help create the future. To flourish in powerful times, personal growth is no longer merely an option; it is a necessity. An inspiring, humane and practical guide to activating the competencies latent within us all.*

Joe Griffin, Director, Early Learning and Childcare,  
Scottish Government



# 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 his famous essay, *The World of Tomorrow and the Person of Tomorrow*, first published in 1969 and later expanded, 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 humanity's future.

As the upheavals of the 1960s played out around him 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, experiments in communal households, cooperative economies and a revolution in popular culture – Rogers was not the only one to sense a dramatic shift and the struggling emergence of a new world. Theodore Roszak (1969),

writing at the same time, captured the spirit of the age in a phrase that has endured: “the making of a counter culture”.

While others at the time feared this loosening of cultural constraints 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 to respond to the challenges of the times that were not merely new applications of old solutions but were calling forth 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 and the sense of a world turned upside down that he envisaged have indeed come to pass. Rogers’ world of tomorrow is our 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’ day, but now play out against a backdrop narrative of economic, existential, social and even planetary threats. We live in powerful times. There is a pervasive sense of incoherence. The old rules, it seems, no longer apply, however much we cling to them and yearn for the return to a settled past. The new rules have yet to stabilize: everything is in beta, temporary, provisional, waiting for the next upgrade.

## **Three Emergencies**

We have found it helpful in getting to grips with these circumstances to frame humanity’s predicament in terms of three ‘emergencies’ – emergent trends that are gathering pace and threaten to overwhelm us.



There is a *real emergency* (or a ‘manifest’ emergency – they are all real): the incipient breakdown of systems we used to take for granted, from democratic governance and decision-making to ecological balance, the persistence of poverty and inequality, the challenge of maintaining basic services like healthcare or clean water, the need to shift away from fossil fuels as ‘climate change’ is increasingly recognised as ‘climate emergency’. The list is familiar, daunting and almost without end.

At the same time there is a *conceptual emergency*: the pervading sense of cognitive dissonance experienced when the core concepts we have relied on to make sense of our world are no longer up to the task.<sup>1</sup> Scientific claims are challenged at the highest levels. Plausibility is as powerful as truth. We see what we believe rather than believe what we see – and even then struggle to make sense of the big picture beyond the fragments.

Don Michael (2010) talked about information overload in the world of ‘the missing elephant’ – in which there is little chance any of us will ever know more than one small piece of the elephant, and there are now so many different pieces, they change so rapidly and they are all so intimately related one to another, that even if we had the technology to put them all together we would still not be able to make sense of the whole. Nor, we might now add, would we believe the results of such an exercise when we can no longer safely distinguish ‘fact’ from ‘deep fake’ manipulated reality.

The real and the conceptual emergencies are then felt in what we might term an *existential emergency* in which their effects show up at the level of the human being, individually and collectively. This is what happens when the shared narratives and patterns of life which provide the ‘glue’ that holds communities and societies together start coming apart. Societies become incoherent and fragmented, we experience ‘culture wars’, a loosening of cultural solidarity and a loss of faith in shared institutions.

These interpenetrated disruptions strike at the heart of our frameworks for reality. What does it mean to be a person in this world? What am I worth? What anchors my identity, my morality, my sense of purpose, my understanding of what we owe

each other? Our collective sanity and sense of continuing existence as a species on a liveable planet is cast into doubt.

The good news is that we can adapt to these new circumstances, we can learn and grow into them. Every culture produces its own form of personhood adapted to life and circumstances in that society. When cultures change personhood changes – just consider the differences in what people find offensive, outrageous or appealing depending on where they were raised.

Already we see new kinds of persons emerging who are more at home in the new complexity and have greater capacity to be effective in the face of the emergencies we describe. Here we ask how this new kind of person – the person of tomorrow – already in our midst and in ourselves may now be 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 astonishing technical competencies that came to dominate the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But in any scenario it will continue to fall to people, to human beings, 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' thirty-year-old question has assumed a new urgency. How can we develop persons of tomorrow, expressing 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies?

## **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 21<sup>st</sup>-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 develop the additional 21<sup>st</sup>-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 five-year study of “key competencies for the 21<sup>st</sup> 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”.<sup>2</sup>

We endorse that definition. It follows that 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies cannot be measured or assessed 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 questionnaires, assessment surveys or written examinations.

The second shift is equally fundamental. In the operating conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

Technical competence can be mastered alone. But its application requires engaging within complex webs of connection and 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 even for the acquisition of technical skills speaks to this dawning recognition in today's hyper-connected world. 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies cannot be observed or exercised except in relationship with other people.

Third, 21<sup>st</sup>-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. 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies must be appreciated holistically. Their expression 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 human capacities and are present in any human system (individual or collective): they simply require the right enabling conditions, settings, life experiences and imagination to be called forth and developed through practice.

In other words, we understand persons of tomorrow as having certain observable inherent 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 20<sup>th</sup>-century culture of the neurotic pursuit of competence. In its place we come down firmly in favour 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, which can flower and manifest even in the direst of circumstances. So it is with the 21<sup>st</sup>-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 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Competence**

It is common in today’s polarized culture to make the case for the new by demonizing the old. That is not our intention here. None of this book is intended to decry the value of what we might call ‘20<sup>th</sup>-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 21<sup>st</sup>-century 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, though necessary, are no longer sufficient. We are now in a different world, a VUCA world of cascading crises where every decision is made against a background of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. 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 – an entirely other level of competence is required.

We applaud the impact of Atul Gawande's *The Checklist Manifesto: How to get things right* (2009) in reducing error in complex technical processes: it certainly helps to prevent removing the wrong limb in an operating theatre. But as Gawande himself was to discover when his own father was terminally ill, checklists have limits and in some situations might actually reduce competence. 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 something more than a tried and tested algorithm to run through. Gawande's later book, *Being Mortal: illness, medicine and what matters in the end*, is not a repudiation of his earlier manifesto but a plea for us to recover our humanity as the context for deploying our technical expertise.

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

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

Whilst we have explored the numerous analyses, reports and lists of 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills, knowledge, competencies, capacities and attributes compiled by others readily available in the business section of any bookstore or in the myriad reports offered by experts in the skills revolution, next generation agile leadership, the future of work and so on, we have chosen to privilege in our own work the observation of people displaying 21<sup>st</sup>-century competence in practice.

We have found 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

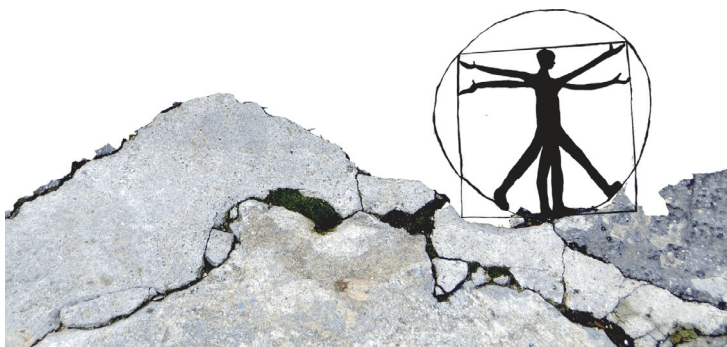
in common, even though they are all manifestly themselves – unique and original. They are the people already among us who inhabit the complex and messy problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a more expansive way than their colleagues.

They do not reduce such problems to the scale of the tools available to them, nor 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 honour 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 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies have been evoked. Some have undertaken dedicated training to enhance their natural capacity.



## 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Competencies

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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' (1996) UNESCO report on education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Learning: The treasure within*. 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 21<sup>st</sup>-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, 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 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies in practice, and how to create an enabling environment for their expression in any organization or other work setting. Start where you are.

Underpinning all of these suggestions is the recognition that the first step is awareness. In order to bring our 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies to bear on a situation we must both become aware that we possess them and can rely on them and at the same time be able to read the landscape with subtle distinction such that we know when and how to deploy them.

In Chapter 4 we identify three critical ‘literacies’: ways of seeing, sensing, feeling, knowing, appreciating, ‘reading’ and making sense of our selves and our circumstances.

The most important is *psychological literacy*. This is a threshold competence: without it the awakening and development of the other 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies is very difficult, if not impossible. Essentially it involves a capacity to read and own one’s psychological response to challenge and to become master of that response rather than its victim.

Challenge, threat, overwhelm and confusion are frequent operating conditions in today’s world and the default psychological defence in these circumstances is denial. It is an automatic response, protective of the psyche and its need for coherence and stability. It requires effort and energy to maintain such defences. When that effort becomes too much we can be swamped by reality and suffer collapse. Denial will protect us for a time, in other words, but it is not a learning stance. Unless we can consciously move 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*. When we can recognize our instinctive tendencies towards denial in the face of overwhelm and consciously respond not by

avoidance but by trying on other psychological responses for size, we call this ‘psychological literacy’.

*Epistemic literacy* (or knowledge literacy if you prefer) is another kind of awareness – essential in a world beset by conceptual emergency. It refers to the ability to read patterns and assumptions about knowing in the landscape. What counts as valid knowledge in this place at this time? What can I claim to ‘know’ and how do I know it? What is the pattern of assumptions that underlies my own truth systems, unexamined but now open to inquiry? With epistemic literacy we can move from being trapped in a single, unexamined worldview to an openness to multiple ways of knowing.

Finally, *cultural literacy* involves the capacity to read the culture and the dynamics of systems and groups. We in the West are inadequate – perhaps woefully so – when it comes to understanding the relationship between cultural context and expressions of human qualities. The dominant culture today is hardly conducive to, and in many cases actively resists, the range of qualities and capacities outlined in the pages that follow. These capacities emerge within a culture of their own – more open, receptive, enabling.

If we wish to operate effectively 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 – 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 our colleague Aftab Omer has referred to as ‘cultural leadership’.

The demonstration and development of the 21<sup>st</sup>-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 calculated to be 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 favoured by the dominant culture. But it is only a matter of degree that separates these acts from more intentional cultural leadership, interventions deliberately taken – in public – to shift the culture (Omer, 2005).<sup>4</sup>

It is a dangerous role. Established cultures fight back. Breaking rules, especially unwritten ones, creates tension at the boundary between the actual and the possible. Admittedly, it takes courage. It is a particular tragedy to see so little willingness to stretch those boundaries in the realm of political leadership. There we find some 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.

Even if not cut out for cultural leadership on the national 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 catalyse the evolution of the culture as a whole.

## **Recognizing 21<sup>st</sup>-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 distress<sup>6</sup>), 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, principally as part of the International Futures Forum (IFF), 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. The competencies explored 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 21<sup>st</sup> century: persons of tomorrow expressing 21<sup>st</sup>-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 everyone else.

However, we did learn that some settings are more conducive to the demonstration of 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies than others. Leader and organizational setting develop together, each level mutually enabling the other. That too is counter-cultural for a leadership development industry that thrives on specialist programmes, 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 found repeatedly that, in today's contexts, leadership is a relational, emergent process where the actions of followers enable the capacities of leaders, and leaders do best when they attune to the deeper aspirations of their followers.

We also saw some highly impressive individuals in action. And we began to realize that we had seen the 21<sup>st</sup>-century qualities they displayed in others we have worked with who operate in roles below the 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.

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. That has always been true, but in an incoherent age which sends people scurrying to the poles for security rather than the centre, even more so – especially in politics.

Even so, while we were writing the first edition of this book the person who exemplified for us the essential aspects of 21<sup>st</sup>-century competence, playing out before us the ups and downs, the struggles and the paradoxes, of being a person of tomorrow in today's world, was then US President, Barack Obama.

We considered using another example for this new edition. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was widely praised, for example, for her humanity, compassion and moral strength in her response to an attack by a lone gunman on a mosque in Christchurch in 2019 which resulted in the death of 51 people. The attack, incidentally, was live-streamed on social media by the perpetrator, another feature of an age in which old boundaries are dissolving.

In the end we concluded we still have much to learn from the example of Obama. We are becoming more attuned to discerning 21<sup>st</sup>-century competence on the world stage, perhaps in view of other models of political leadership now more prominently on display both in the US and elsewhere. Obama continues to offer a study in how those competencies might show up in the political arena and also, since he continues to perform his role as a cultural

leader even out of office, a barometer for their wider appreciation. If only to root the concepts we outline in this book in some kind of shared experience, therefore, we continue to reference Obama as an example of what we are talking about.

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, 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 yet 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 21<sup>st</sup>-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.<sup>7</sup> But in the end, as our own small act of cultural leadership, we believe we must recognize 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies where they show up, especially in such a public figure as Obama.

We notice, for example, that his would-be successors amongst the Democrats continue to embrace and appreciate Obama, the qualities of the man, even if they distance themselves from ‘Obama-ism’ the programme (Linskey, 2019). We note that he left office with good grace and has schooled his supporters to follow his example in service of a more tolerant culture. In November 2016, for example, at a campaign rally in North Carolina for Hillary Clinton shortly before the election, he was heckled by an elderly gentleman. The crowd started booing, shouting the heckler down. It was small stuff compared with what had been happening at Republican rallies in the same campaign. But Obama stopped them in their tracks. “Hold up!” he said. “Hold up!” Then when they eventually quietened: “First of all, we live in a country that respects free speech. Second of all, it looks like maybe he might have served in our military and we gotta respect that. Third of all, he was elderly and we gotta respect our elders. And fourth of all, don’t boo. Vote.” It was an object lesson, delivered instinctively in the moment, in the practice of tolerance and the requirements for a mature democratic culture.

There are many memorable examples of such cultural leadership to draw on in Obama's case and there are likely to be more in the future. Think back, for example, to January 2011 and the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords at a 'meet the people' event in a supermarket car park 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 neighbour. He praised those who had acted swiftly and selflessly to limit the slaughter – moving the audience to whooping like a campaign rally.

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 already present in the hearts of 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 21<sup>st</sup>-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 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies, and even today 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**

We wrote this book to share 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 our writing it, and more particularly your reading it, will help to progress that goal.

Since publishing the first edition there have been many more opportunities to learn about the 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies in action. We are inspired by the multitude of projects under way that are changing the concrete conditions of life for many people around the world and which, pursued through participation in a variety of new ways of organizing and collaborating, are also enabling those involved to grow into new ways of being. People getting together to "meet important challenges in life in a complex world" (as the OECD definition has it) are providing the spaces and places and opportunities for a fuller range of human capacities to emerge.

Books are only part of the process of change. The truth is that our culture will shift and the 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies will be



developed only through practice. You cannot learn to play the cello by reading a book, although gaining a technical understanding will provide a sound foundation. And whilst books of advice can help, you will not get fit unless you go through the process of exercise. The 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies are like that. The real challenge for all of us is first to raise our awareness of the circumstances we find ourselves in and then 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, programmes, support networks, specific courses and the like that may well have a role to play, including those we have developed based on this book since its first publication. That is like going to the gym and taking on a personal trainer. 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 21<sup>st</sup>-century selves to work and to our communities 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.



# Index

- adhocracy, 128, 129, 134-136  
Albrow, Martin, 136, 137  
allophilia, 117  
Antonovsky, Aaron, 69, 146,  
Ardern, Jacinda, 25, 47  
Ariely, Dan, 67, 68, 120
- Bateson, Gregory, 38, 182  
Bauman, Zygmunt, 96, 118,  
171  
Blom, Phillip, 33  
Boisot, Max, 135, 136  
Broadie, Alexander, 115, 116
- Collins, Jim, 26, 142, 180  
competence, v, vi, 14-17, 61,  
62, 66, 73, 77, 80, 103  
and culture, 14-17  
competencies  
21<sup>st</sup>-century, 7-9, 14-16,  
19-22, 24, 26-29, 60, 61,  
73, 74, 77, 84-88, 90, 94,  
102, 110, 127, 137, 141-  
146, 151, 155-157, 161-  
167, 169  
core, 63  
connoisseurship, 125  
Cosgrove, Mark, 125, 126,  
184
- Coups, Plenty, 110, 111  
creative integrity, 162, 163  
Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly,  
54, 57, 172
- defence mechanisms, 58  
denial, 1, 8, 12, 21, 29, 49-  
52, 58, 78  
futility, 58  
jeopardy, 58  
perversity, 58  
defensive denial, v, vi, 49-51,  
56
- Delors, Jacques, 20, 77, 87,  
141, 168  
double task, 21, 22, 78, 86,  
116, 142, 143  
Drucker, Peter, 36
- Eckersley, Richard, 129  
emergencies, three, 8, 12-14,  
36, 41  
emergency  
conceptual, 8, 13, 22, 59  
Enlightenment, the, vii, 66,  
68, 100, 101, 115, 116, 120,  
122  
epistemic awareness, 80  
Esalen, 89, 154

## *Dancing at the Edge*

- Festinger, Leon, 49  
Frankl, Victor, 71  
Freire, Paulo, 54, 148  
Freud, Sigmund, 34, 54, 61
- Gaia theory, 118  
Gawande, Atul, 18  
Giffords, Gabrielle, 27  
Grimshaw, Alex, 7
- Hanna, Thomas, 89  
holism, 34  
homeschooling, 40
- IFF Academy, 156  
immigration, 40  
individualism, 3, 92, 100,  
109, 182  
International Futures Forum,  
4, 9, 24  
IFF Academy, 9  
IFF kitbag, 112, 113, 161-  
164  
IFF Practice Centre, 156,  
159  
IFF prompts, 161
- James, William, 84, 88  
Jerram, Luke, 112  
Jobs, Steve, 47- 49  
Jullien, François, 150
- Kahane, Adam, 155  
Kahneman, Daniel, 67, 72  
Kegan, Robert, 54-58, 73  
Kitayama, Shinobu, 41
- Koestler, Arthur, 70, 104  
Konrath, Sara, 102
- leadership, 3, 7, 18, 22-27, 36,  
66, 72, 84, 103, 107, 109-  
114, 132, 135, 142, 146,  
149, 159, 170  
cultural leadership, 109-  
11  
learning anxiety, 1  
learning journeys, 4, 154  
learning, four pillars, vi, 87  
being, 88  
being together, 99-102  
learning to do, 127-40  
learning to know, 115-26
- Lewin, Kurt, 104, 153  
Limits to Growth, 35  
literacies, three, 8, 21-23, 78,  
80, 85-87, 113  
cultural literacy, 103-7
- Little, Ruth, 93
- Marriage, Helen, 133  
Maslow, Abraham, 17, 54,  
69-71, 88, 182  
May, Rollo, 52  
Michael, Don, 13, 35, 36, 90,  
130, 134, 154, 182  
Mintzberg, Henry, 128, 129  
mirror neurons, 100  
MIT Media Lab, 155
- nativism, 41  
Obama, Barack, 7, 25-28, 40,  
41, 91, 97, 108, 117, 118  
Omer, Aftab, 22, 23, 113, 114

- organization
  - as an integrity, 137
- Orlov, Dimitry, 59
- Porter, Elsa, 82
- practical hope, 9, 165
- producer, role of the, 132-134, 137, 147, 149
- psychosphere, 37-41, 37, 180
- qualities of persons of
  - tomorrow, 90
  - balance, 94
  - compassion, 93
  - faith in the future, 96-98
  - humility, 90-94
- Rayner, Steve, 125
- rehearsal spaces, 153-157
- responses, three, 7, 8, 21, 25, 47, 49, 52, 56, 59-64, 66, 70, 78, 84, 92, 96, 131, 167-170, 183
- Rogers, Carl, 11-15, 54, 88, 97, 104, 154, 179, 182
- Schein, Edgar H., v, 1, 5, 7, 91, 157, 181
- Schön, Donald, 85, 134
- Seeley Brown, John, 142
- Senge, Peter, 145
- Sharpe, Bill, 138, 139
- Shweder, Richard, 43, 181
- Smuts, Jan, 34
- Soares, Luiz Eduardo, 112
- spiral dynamics, 54
- survival anxiety, 1
- teamwork, 16, 131
- transformative innovation, 9, 142
- Trump, Donald, 40, 47, 108
- trumpet, uncertain, 170
- wise groups, 107
- World Peace Game, 152
- Yankelovich, Daniel, 68



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