

*This paper was presented at the annual conference of the American Creativity Association, spring 2003.*

## **Opening the organizational consciousness for the future**

*"This, in fact, is a classic characteristic of mature organizations. They fail to innovate because they fail to recognize the fact that they have been rejecting data that does not support the company's mental models".*

*From Foster & Kaplan: Creative Destruction (New York, 2001).*

### **"A simplified and lucid image of the world"**

If you enter the subway system of any large city, you'll find boards on the walls displaying the infrastructure of the subway system, most often illustrated as colored lines with the stations marked as dots or circles along the network of lines. Now, what would you call the illustration displayed on such a board? -You might answer "a map". However, if we compare with a real map, the illustration does not meet the characteristics of such, since the simplifications regarding distances and directions are so rude that it would not serve us well, if we tried to find our way walking around in the city. A normal map has consistence in the scale, mirroring reality, whereas the illustration of the subway infrastructure rather is made after principles of pedagogical and graphical clarity, which makes it an efficient tool for finding our way from station to station within the subway system. Instead of a map, we could describe such illustration as a *model*.

Models are crucial for us in our attempt to perceive and understand the world around us – we use them, so to speak, to find our way in the complexity of input provided by our senses and thoughts. As the cognitive psychologist Dean Keith Simonton says: *"A tight analog or model permits us to know more about the world with less work"*. The 'less work' comes from the simplifications within the model; imagine we had a city map without simplifications of any kind – it would have to be in 1:1 scale, so running our way through the map would be just as time-consuming and complicated as running through the streets of the city. Therefore, as Einstein once stated: *"Man seeks for himself a simplified and lucid image of the world"*.

### **Mental Models**

The Scottish psychologist Kenneth Craik is said to be the originator of the concept of 'mental models', which he explains in this quotation:

*"If the organism carries a "small-scale model" of external reality and of its own possible actions within its head, it is able to try out various alternatives, conclude which is the best of them, react to future situations before they arise, utilize the knowledge of the past events in dealing with the present and*

*future, and in every way to react in a much fuller, safer, and more competent manner to the emergencies which face it."*

I have not read Craik myself; I found the quote in Foster & Kaplan's "Creative Destruction". In this book, the concept of Mental Models is lifted from the field of psychology into the field of managing innovation within organizations. The authors describe their interpretation of 'mental models' thus: *"Mental models are the core concepts of the corporation, the beliefs and assumptions, the cause-and-effect relationships, the guidelines for interpreting language and signals, the stories repeated within the corporate walls."*

## **The blindness of maturity**

Although mental models, like all models, are tools for understanding the world around us, they also can inhibit the same understanding, since the "vocabulary" of the models is bound to experiences of the past and may hinder interception of new ideas contradicting these experiences – as for instance new solutions made possible by the introduction of new technologies, new market players etc. As mentioned earlier, any model is a simplification; it excerpts a 'lucid image' by choosing one specific way of looking at the world - so to speak like a pair of colored glasses, leaving out any other color. If you choose to wear blue glasses, the world will look blue, so you leave out some of the complexity, and this can serve a purpose. But if the glasses stay put so long that you forget *why* the world looks blue, you have a problem – your consciousness gets blinded by the past. In fact, not only you can forget that you wear 'blue glasses', you can even develop a hostility towards other 'glasses', resulting in rejection of data not consistent with your mental model. Once established, a mental model fixes the vision into only what makes sense according to the model, and hence the model not only guides, it also makes mental blinkers. This phenomenon we could call "**the blindness of maturity**". In his famous book, "The Innovator's Dilemma", Clayton Christensen describes this conflict between established companies with fixed mindset and up-comers with new mental models: *"Perhaps the most powerful protection that small entrant firms enjoy as they build the emerging markets for disruptive technologies is that they are doing something that it simply does not make sense for the established leaders to do." "... successful companies populated by good managers have a genuinely hard time doing what does not fit their model for how to make money".*

Christensen also describes how both the value sets and the organizational systems – e.g. the reward and incentive systems – are geared around the existing business, serving existing customers, and hence hinder engagement in upcoming markets. This problem is further addressed by Wind & Crook in their book "The power of impossible thinking", describing how organizations *"build an infrastructure of processes and investments to support a given mental model, and these become very hard to dismantle"*. The authors suggest high attention to the process of **dismantling** out-dated mental models as the most crucial precondition for the application of new mental models. Such

process truly is a creative destruction, meant to open the organizational 'consciousness' for the future.

## **A deliberate management effort**

The question then is how to do it: How can we unlock the vision of the organization for fundamentally new ways of thinking? - Any attempt to unlock the constraints requires conscious innovation leadership, by which the "invisible" mental models are made visible – "you can't tame, what you can't name". Facing this problem of the 'blindness of maturity', I have here extracted some core principles for 'opening the organizational consciousness':

1. Breakthrough of fundamentally new thinking require the creative destruction of established mental models
2. After such breakthrough, the world is perceived differently - existing activities are seen in another perspective and new actions are called upon
3. To reach new breakthroughs, the organizational dialogue must deliberately open up for alternative mental models
4. The role of management is to set the agenda for this dialogue and let many 'schools of thought' compete within the organization, in order to avoid any mental model from gaining absolute power.

So, to conclude, I suggest looking at innovation as a "thought competition" which brings forward new mental models, from which the world can be reinterpreted and new directions pointed out.

© Arne Stjernholm Madsen 2006

### *References:*

Clayton Christensen: The Innovator's Dilemma, New York, 2000.

Foster & Kaplan: Creative Destruction (New York, 2001)

Y. Wind & C. Crook: The power of impossible thinking (Wharton - NJ, 2005)