

# Learning in Performance: How a Dutch Company Transformed Itself

*Philip H. Mirvis, Karen Ayas, and George L. Roth*

## Introduction

In February 2000, we were with Tex Gunning, then chairman of Van den Bergh Netherlands (VdBN), a foods division of Unilever, and 200 leadership team members in Wadi Rum, a valley amid jutting mountains in the Jordanian desert. The team leaders, stirred by a morning camel ride, unfolded their previously prepared, annotated time lines of important events in their work lives, beginning in 1995. Nestled in mountain crevices, the leaders, grouped in business teams, swapped “stories” about the reasons for successes and failures. Later, around a campfire, they unfurled cloth banners that recorded each team’s experiences, and business heads cum “tribe leaders” summed up the lessons. This process, which continued for another day and a half, was carried forward at the firm’s annual learning conference where 1,800 employees joined their team leaders, shared their own story lines, and broadened the circle of reflection and learning.

Before moving to his next assignment, Gunning wanted to document the transformation of VdBN during his five-year tenure. So, in late 1999, we began a learning history to identify key transforming events, find their meaning and significance, and assess their impact on employees and the business. In so doing, we wanted to involve all concerned in the analysis of events and detailing of lessons learned.

The learning history was the joint effort of a team of action researchers, including us and several leaders from VdBN. Every employee, selected managers from Unilever, and various suppliers and contractors contributed to the findings. The formal process began when Gunning and Philip Mirvis, a consultant to the company, compared notes about the transformation and developed a set of “action theories” to interpret what had happened and why. In Jordan and later gatherings, the hope was that engaging leaders in evocative storytelling at memorable venues would itself be a historic event in the company’s time line and carry the lessons forward with added vigor (see Part III on using a learning history as an intervention).

The transformation story began in 1995 with the appointment of Gunning as chairman and the turnaround of the Unox factory and brand. It continued with the merger of several Unilever food businesses under one flag in 1997 and the decision of the management board to have 200 leaders. It continued through 1998 to 2000 with large-scale events, like that in the desert of Jordan, designed to mark progress, develop and deepen the changes in the business and culture, and create a legacy of growth.

The learning history of VdBN is a chronological story of events and experiences, covering the two cycles of change. The first transformation concerns Unox, which has meat, sauce, and soup factories in the south of Holland. The second transformation involves the merging of Unox into VdBN, headquartered in Rotterdam, to create the largest food manufacturer in Holland. Of the total current workforce in VdBN, about 800 employees have lived through both transformations.



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Each transformation had a unifying vision, captured in the slogan, “Competing for our future,” that appeared on hats and clothing, on company flags, and as a recurring theme at companywide gatherings. This growth message was expressed quantitatively in “stretch targets” and unit-specific performance measurements. A mix of “hard” and “soft” changes were implemented, based on these analyses and goals. At Unox and later VdBN, the hard side of change involved restructuring, asset sales, and staff reductions, along with the formation of business units and introduction of profit-and-loss accounting and responsibilities. On the soft side, new types of management meetings, staff training, team building, and organizational development efforts were launched.

One unassailable conclusion is that the business grew during the five years. The overall rate of growth, in sluggish categories in a mature industry, was 4% per annum. The foods business unit, which introduced several new products, entered new markets, and used new channels to fuel the growth engine, grew by 13% in 1999. The fats business unit, after prior years of decline, stabilized volumes, increased market share, and grew several of its brands. Efficiencies in several factories improved from 60% to more than 80%, and trading losses decreased dramatically.

A key conclusion of the learning history is that these results have been neither incremental nor routine. On the contrary, they have been shaped by business breakthroughs and innovative change management. We found that the change process at VdBN has been guided by a set of principles, often tacit and unspoken. For instance, transformations typically begin with an awakening—the aims of which are to focus attention on the “current reality,” break through denial and resistance, and create urgency for change. In both Unox in 1995 and VdBN in 1997, there were orchestrated efforts to “wake up” the organization to current problems and foreseeable performance gaps. But the wake-up calls were noteworthy on two counts. First, attention-getting events, rich in substance and symbolism, helped to ensure that all employees understood the depth of problems and need for action. Second, these emotive experiences were complemented by intellectual rigor: Andersen Consulting and other experts worked with the leaders to analyze each situation thoroughly and identify areas for change.

Tracking these two cycles of transformation suggests that VdBN leaders have, over this period, been learning to manage change proactively. The change management methods introduced in the first transformation—from a symbolic awakening and assessment of current reality to the detailing of a vision and implementation of new ways of working—are replicated in the second transformation. Efforts to mobilize people are similar in the two cases, albeit more encompassing and engaging in the second.

Companywide gatherings called learning conferences spread and deepened the transformation process at Unox. This was amplified even more in the second transformation cycle at VdBN through culture-building events, such as team-leader days and annual retreats, plus the elaboration of learning conferences through preparatory and follow-up activities.

While some facets of change management at VdBN were carefully planned, others were more or less improvised (see the sidebar, an interview with Tex Gunning). The real story of leadership and transformation at VdBN is the “holistic integration” of activities or, more colloquially, the “art of management.” This was the result of continuous experimentation and learning, a mix of planning and improvisation, and space for serendipity.

Events, increasingly more sophisticated and engaging, punctuated the growth of leaders and development of company culture. Rites and rituals are universal: tribes everywhere, ancient and modern, use them to mark time and achievements. These events, which might be termed “performances,” are unusual in business and have been singular

at VdBN for their creativity, scale, and impact.

Next, in Part I, we elaborate on the idea of marking progress and creating change via events and underscore the performative aspects of the VdBN transformation story. In Part II, Karen Ayas provides a first-person account of the team leaders’ event in the Jordanian desert in February 2000—a “performance” that marks collectively the leadership passage. In Part III, George Roth describes how a learning history becomes a “real time” intervention and part of the performance in Jordan.

*Rites and rituals are universal: tribes everywhere, ancient and modern, use them to mark time and achievements.*

# Part I. Leading Change: From Process to Performance

## Scene 1

In a Unox warehouse in the south of Holland, a fleet of forklifts has amassed 10,000 pallets, stacked floor to ceiling with canned food labeled “waste.” This crisp morning, buses arrive from three nearby factories. Managers and their cost accountants, quality experts and production workers—some 1,600 employees—tour aisles of spoiled material, count the massive loss of money, and contemplate the waste of their own time and talents. The stage is set for outbursts and resentment, analysis and confrontation, and later acknowledgement and first steps toward a new way.

## Scene 2

Eighteen months later, skaters glide on frozen canals through Holland. It’s that special spontaneous holiday, *ElfstedenTocht*, when waterways linking 11 cities freeze over, and the nation takes a day off to play. Along the waterways, the same Unox employees, now numbering only 800 due to restructuring and asset sales, hand out bright orange stocking caps that bear the Unox logo. To conclude the day, the employees, vigorous and proud, assemble en masse, strip off all but their orange hats, and dash into the wintry North Sea. Later, tens of thousands of skaters, in towns large and small, are pictured on national television and on the front pages of newspapers wearing the orange hats.

## Scene 3

A year and a half later, in the cellar of a medieval monastery in Belgium’s Ardennes forest, some 200 leaders from Unox and its merger partner VdBN hop from one cold foot to another as they wait to hear the words of their chairman. There are no histrionics on spoiled food this time. Instead he speaks from the heart about the death of his father, his abusive family, the highs and lows of his schooling, and his career. As he finishes, a young supervisor shouts out, “Thank you for sharing that, Tex. It’s good to know you better.” The leaders then share their own “emotional life stories” and talk about their lives and work, who they are, and what has shaped them. In the small group discussions and whole-group dialogues that follow, there is the sense that this is something new and important in their dealings with one another.

In the language of business and the social sciences, the vignettes above describe processes. While definitions vary in specific applications, processes in general involve the ordering of tasks and activities across time and space, with specified steps from A to B. There are well-mapped processes concerning the flow of work, patterns of communication and control, steps in problem solving and decision making, and so on. Managers, in turn, are expected to apply process thinking to production, quality control, and service delivery tasks, and to develop processes for change management and organizational learning (Garvin, 1998).

Each scene above is an element in a process. For instance, the carefully constructed warehouse tour, in process terms, typifies the start of a change effort whereby new information helps to “unfreeze” an enterprise that has grown complacent about quality and stayed profitable through price increases. This event is a prototypical wake-up call—which was followed in this case by intense study of production practices and consumer trends—that helped staff to develop a clear if unforgiving view of current reality.

Outfitting skaters with the orange Unox hats exemplifies an inspired promotion process. Marketing studies had shown that customers were bored with the products, which were losing appeal. Improving the quality might improve taste and, in time, profit margins, but market gains would hinge more on repositioning the product line and giving the brand an updated identity and some sizzle. Interestingly, the skating event not only associated the brand with vitality and fun, but also had unanticipated benefits: the buzz enhanced Unox’s corporate image and people’s pride in their employer.

The meeting in the monastery was emblematic of culture building—a process to blend cultures in the post-merger period (Marks and Mirvis, 1997). The chairman used behavioral processes when presenting his life story to model openness for the staff,



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stimulate dialogue, and demonstrate the commonality in stories from people in two different companies. This not only hastened development of rapport between merging staffs, but also sped up their fact-finding and collaborative efforts.

### Performativity

In the language of the arts and the emerging discipline of performance studies, the events described might be termed performances. In each instance, the actions of the leaders and staff are more or less scripted and unfold through scenes. The events themselves are staged, with scenery and actors in place, costumes and props ready, and the chairman cum director exerting a strong or light hand, depending on the performance. The parallels between process and performance are striking: the latter also involves an arrangement of activities across time and space, dramatization with a beginning and end, and activity, termed by scholars of the genre as performativity, that pulls it all together (Carlson, 1996).

This distinction may seem moot. In everyday language, people speak easily of the “art of leadership,” read about management as a “performing art,” and move toward craftsmanship in labor, harmony in teamwork, and “world-class” performance. But to lift up and focus specifically on the performative aspects of leadership, we believe, offers a fresh, useful way to see, understand, and undertake organizational change.

Let’s look again at the “awakening” in the warehouse in theatrical terms. The staging is surreal: the staff’s early morning bus ride to an unknown destination; secrecy about its intent and the part they are about to play; stacked pallets whose meaning emerges as the tour progresses; signs detailing the contents, costs, and causes of the mess; all amplified by company officials in white lab coats. As performance, it immerses employees in an unfamiliar, unexpected reality. The sights shock them, the smells from open cans nauseate them, and the sound effects—Mozart’s requiem piped over loudspeakers—add another layer of showmanship. The act ends with an aptly staged scene: forklifts move pallets from the warehouse to a nearby pit where the waste is buried.

That change follows a script is not surprising. Anthropologists have documented rites of passage that punctuate change in many cultures, and the idea that cultures enact change through social dramas—in the formula of an upheaval, then conflict and reordering, and finally reintegration—is well established (Turner, 1957). Indeed, a well-known framework characterizes organizational change as a “three-act drama” (Tichy and Sherman, 1993). In these academic uses, however, drama is a metaphor for cultural activity. By comparison, in the case discussed here, the drama is an experience. Indeed, we

## Appeal to the Head and the Heart: An Interview with Tex Gunning

*This interview was held on a gloomy Sunday afternoon in Tex Gunning's office overlooking Rotterdam, in December 1999. Philip Mirvis and Karen Ayas participated in the conversation.*

### How and when did the emphasis on heart and emotions come into the business?

What I always do is think deeply about where we are in the transformation process. What is the issue? What should be the next move? Where are the people and the leaders? What do they need?

With the merger, we had had a tough year. At the end-of-year management conference in Antwerp in December 1997, we wanted to *reconnect* with who we are and who we want to be and to the best in us. In the morning, in a church-like building, we first discussed business. I encouraged and gave credit to those who deserved it. But it is also my role to say when things are not going well, even my own performance. I was tough and told it straight.

After lunch, we viewed a clip from the movie *Abyss* in which the main characters have to choose who will survive the swim from a leaking sub to a ship. The man, who is the better swimmer, gets the only oxygen mask. He has to drown his wife, although the water is so cold that she has a slim chance to survive. Once on the ship, she is declared clinically dead, but he does not give up until they revive her. After this emotional scene, board members were crying. I began by asking, "Do you feel that there is more in you than just brains? That you also have emotions?" I told them that I had had a lousy year, both in business and personally. For the first time, I had been unable to bring a real team together, which frustrated me and kept me off balance. I apologized because I had not delivered what I should have as a business leader. Then I told them that if they wanted to grow, they had to connect with each other and with themselves. We began to discuss emotions. The effect was tangible. I had hit a nerve, appealed to what everyone wanted, and unlocked the energy for growth.

### Where did it go from there?

A few months later, we shared our personal and business stories in a management team-building session. People first spent 45 minutes writing their life stories. What have been major factors in your life? What do you stand for? What do you want to achieve? When we shared the stories, the first manager who really opened up was responsible for a plant. He was a very respected person who had been on the board for eight years and played an important role in the transformation. He cried and talked about what he had been through. This set the scene for me. I was the last to speak, and I broke down too. We were open, honest, and real with each other.

Afterward, my coach Laura was furious, "There was a guy sitting there crying, and you could not even put your arms around him!" I was shocked and I realized how poor we were because we could not express our emotions or our empathy.

That all changed on our trip to the Ardennes. In the cellar of a ruin, I presented my emotional life story. It was not easy. I was in a little space in front of 200 team leaders, talking about the death of my father, an abusive family, and the ups and downs of my adolescence. The silence became tangible. You touch people's hearts when you talk openly about your emotions. I will never forget that a young woman in finance was angry that I had not told my story sooner. There was an implicit message: "We would have forgiven you, if we could have understood you." In that cellar, everyone created their own emotional life story and shared it in groups of two or three. The purpose of this in business is to help others know you and explain why you behave in certain ways.

### How does this link to the transformation?

The logic was simple: we needed to grow the business. For the business to grow, we needed creativity and diversity. And people had to take initiative and responsibility, which require an open, respectful, and trustworthy environment. But that wasn't enough.

People can write a value statement saying that they will be honest, open, and respect each other. I had done that before, and it does not work. To get real openness and respect, you have



Tex Gunning

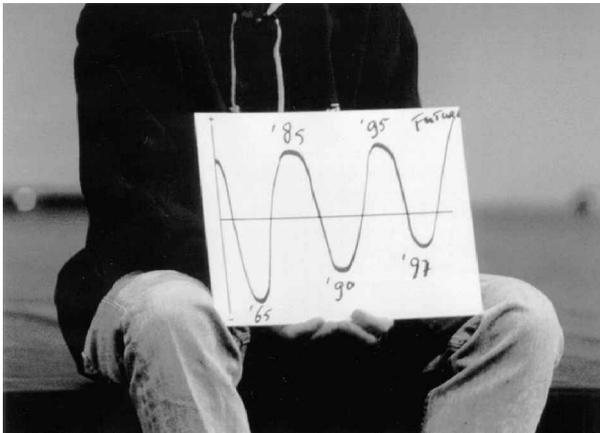
to become open yourself and, therefore, vulnerable. If you want growth, you need an open, respectful culture. It took us a while to make the link between opening the emotional side and growing the business.

Another turning point came when the management team held a fishbowl discussion in front of the 200 team leaders. When I angered one of my managers, the team jumped on me. I apologized. People came out saying, "These guys are prepared to expose themselves." That was the "miracle" that we needed.

### What do you mean by a miracle?

You can never create miracles. But you can create an environment that is inspirational, where it is safe to try things, where you can start to inquire. You can do that by design. At every team-leader event, at every learning conference, we try to create space for that miracle. At Ardennes, we used the emotional life stories and the management team's fishbowl discussion. Vulnerability is powerful. All the units became connected; there was a different tone.

Right after the Ardennes event, the management team had lunch together. I knew the learning conference for the whole company was coming up, so I asked them, "Are we prepared to do this with 1,800 people? Which of you will do this? I'll be telling my life story first." One said yes; then three others. Two management team members agreed to tell their life stories; two others would do masks [to share what is behind the masks they wear at work]. We would demonstrate that we are serious about openness.



Time line

Two weeks later, 1,800 people came together in a big theater. I did not start with my usual song-and-dance presentation about the figures. Instead I sat on the stage and said, "Before we begin, I'd like you to tell you a bit more about me." I cannot recall whether I told the story very well, but I was tense. Later, when I did my normal presentation, I couldn't do it. By then, I was too emotional to tell a rational story. I had a two-hour fight with myself to "get connected with the audience," and I could not.

After a break, the two plant managers told their stories. One described his early childhood during WWII; he never saw his father until after the war because his father had been arrested as a collaborator. From that day, his life changed. In disgrace, he had to change schools; the family had to keep the curtains in the house drawn. His father was eventually acquitted, but the

damage was done. He also told of how he had been working with someone who had cheated and stabbed him in the back. He combined these two events to explain how his trust had been broken. Only then did I realize why this guy was so independent in his work. He rejected interdependency purely because of his childhood and his career experience. He broke down on stage, and the effect was profound. People thought they knew this man, and realizing they did not, they felt guilty.

Then the other plant manager talked about going to a Belgium boarding school, which, he explained, was not just for rich kids, but also for young criminal kids. He described how he was beaten up every day. He had resolved that he never was going to be beaten again.

Next were the two managers who demonstrated their masks. One was an Englishman who, even in the exercise, did not really show himself, but became very emotional about his relationship with his wife, showing everyone her picture. At last, we saw his human side. Then the finance director, not the most open character, described his attachment to his family.

At that point, the 1,800 people went to work on their own emotional life stories. I will never forget the silence. Normally, there would be enormous noise with that many people working, but it was quiet. People were drawing and concentrating. I could not believe the intensity with which they approached this task.

After the learning conference, this company became more open. People realized that the management team was human. I had told them that I alone could not grow this business. I could help, bring strategy, and be a coach, but they could not expect me to grow this business. I told them, "You can do it; just be yourself." And that is what we did.

contend that the performativity itself was transformative; Gunning and his team transformed through their performance. Their warehouse theatrics, akin to the first act of the drama, are a harbinger of the further transformation—of themselves and their business.

The skating performance is a different kind of theater in which the performance is largely unscripted and the audience drives the show. Consider the elements of improvisation: the orange hats, for example, came from the chairman, who had no plans for how to use them. The idea to link them to skating was a leap of imagination and wholly dependent on cooperative weather (freeze-overs do not happen every year). Staff members had only the vaguest idea where to gather and how to get their countrymen into costume. It's likely that few of the skaters—who, by turns, were audience and actors—appreciated at the moment how their costuming, vigor, and color choreography added branding to the spectacle. Interestingly, the staff's dash into frigid waters, imagined as a cast party, turned into a social performance itself. Their costuming, or lack thereof, made the experience even more memorable.

A serious scholar might develop the symmetry between the two scenes: the symbolic death of the old culture in the food burial pit and the subsequent rebirth of a new culture through baptism in the sea. No doubt this rite of passage afforded a deep, if subliminal, meaning to the occasion. But consider two other aspects of the experience. First, the performance was a one-time event. Its uniqueness and singularity, coupled with widespread media coverage, made the experience even more memorable. Second, the performance was successful because people played. In a mix of improvisation and street theater, the staff had fun chasing after skaters, surprising them with hats, getting them into the act, and then watching the swathe of orange hats gliding against white snow. To what degree did the instinctually appealing aspects of play and interplay, with laughter and hilarity, make this event a transformative experience for employees and consumers alike?

By comparison, the meeting in the monastery was a far different kind of show. When Gunning effected the merger of Unox into VdBN, he analyzed problems and opportunities, developed a vision of growth, and then launched successful new products into the marketplace, all the right moves. But something was missing. Managers meeting in late 1997 agreed that, although business was improving, the company lacked "heart." What emerged was top managers' aspiration to reconnect deeply—intellectually and emotionally—to each other and to customers.

In early 1998, aided by Laura Tan, his adviser (or dramaturg in theater terms), and a team from the Foundation for Community Encouragement, Gunning led the retreat into the Ardennes forest for 200 leaders from every level. In addition to sharing emotional life stories, the leaders bicycled and camped together, met for fishbowl-type discussions (the top team in the center, observed by all), and joined for both quiet reflection and boisterous revelry. Subsequently, at a companywide learning conference, all 1,800 employees prepared emotional life stories and talked about themselves and their work.

Two aspects of the Ardennes performance are significant. First, Gunning and his top team had to be role models for the staff (actors) and put on the show (producers). A complex script with complicated staging, set designs, and logistics lay behind this performance. In pulling it all together, top managers demonstrated their own teamwork and reconnection to the leaders of their business. (See the sidebar interview with Gunning for his view of the drama as both director and actor.)

Second, the experience moved everyone into what anthropologists call "deep play," wherein fundamental ideas and cultural codes are open to inspection (Geertz, 1973). Whereas the skating experience was primarily "fun," the Ardennes retreat and subsequent all-staff learning conference enabled people to "play" with their culture. In reflective conversations—very much part of the performance—they talked about their frustrations, skepticism about change, and difficulties of truly connecting as people. They in turn made a commitment to be authentic with each other, to listen deeply, and to deal with difficult business issues. In this respect, the performance was an occasion for cultural reflexivity. In playing their parts, the employees were developing new cultural mores. One attendee summed up: "For me, the experience represented a major turnaround. . . . The way leaders and then all the people of Van den Bergh showed something personal about themselves. The example

*Anthropologists have documented rites of passage that punctuate change in many cultures . . .*

**Table 1** Process and performance distinctions

<i>Process</i>	<i>Performance</i>
Plan	Script
Steps	Scenes
Staff	Cast
Do	Act
Manager	Director
Deliver	Delight

showed that I am more than just a ‘working’ person in the company. The ‘whole’ person is welcomed.”

## Process versus Performance

The idea that leadership, management, customer service, and, indeed, almost any work can be understood as a performing art has intellectual merit for scholars and decided appeal to many practitioners (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). There are several outstanding comparisons between the elements of organizational and theatrical performance. Consider some of the following *process versus performance* distinctions (see the table).

### *Plan versus Script*

Processes are based on plans. Mission statements, the goals they express, and the activities needed to achieve them describe what has to be done and the steps for doing it. Although the inputs, throughputs, and outputs differ in, say, strategic, financial, and operational plans, what they specify in toto is *what* has to happen to get the job done right. Scripts serve this function in performances. But the script goes deeper and further by elaborating and detailing *how* things should be done. One could quibble about the *what-how* distinction by referencing the tactical plans, instructions, and performance requirements through which plans are elaborated, activities specified, and controls designed. Instead, think of it as a matter of shading and intention. Consider the highest compliments that are given to a plan: a good plan is logical, sensible, sound. While a script conveys a plan, it also addresses the expression of emotion, suggests how to bring activity to life, and reminds us that “art” is to be performed. That’s what makes a good script beautiful.

### *Steps versus Scenes*

In process steps versus performance scenes, we find the same relative emphasis on *what* versus *how*. Both dictate sequence, flow, and timing. Attention to the scene also stresses the emotive aspects of action and aims at the experience of being there. One could argue that precisely because the warehouse awakening was staged, it had such a powerful impact. Compare these employee reactions to the informative and performative aspects of the warehouse event and to its impact as a meeting rather than an experience.

#### *Informative:*

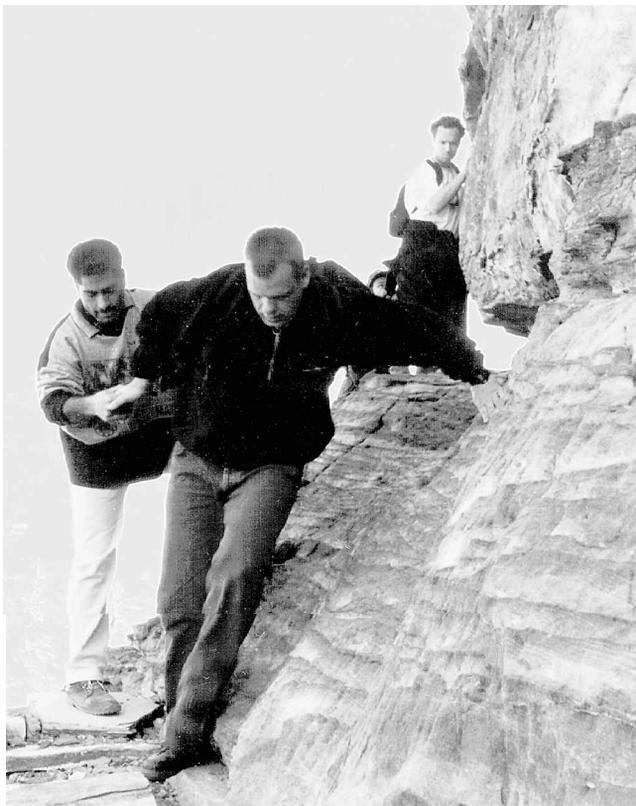
At the warehouse, we were told what we were doing was not right. We got more information. We got to see the numbers. There were quality problems. That was a shock for me because the people did their best and they were never told. This factory is our bread. If it goes bad with the factory, it goes bad for us.

#### *Performative:*

The whole thing was definitely masterminded. The structure of the event was to introduce the strategic situation in a very graphic and powerful way. Exultant music. Piles of products. The stamp ‘reject.’ Oh God! This is a warehouse full of reject product!

### *Staff versus Cast*

Working and acting join in the “roles” people assume on the job and on stage. Indeed, the organizational use of the term borrows from theater precisely to put work into a performance context and communicate fully its performative standards. Still, there is a different social significance to being a member of a “cast,” rather than part of the staff. For



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instance, the work of the actor getting into character, with the attendant imagining, rehearsing, costuming, makeup, and so on asks more of people than, say, standard job descriptions and demands more presence than simply showing up. In turn, actors often feel strong loyalty for their performances and their own artistry. This is akin to staff having a professional rather than organizational identity and is a mixed blessing for managers: self-styled impresarios sometimes value their own performance far more than the success of the show.

Working as a cast involves teamwork and like any high performing team, a theater troupe has inescapable interdependencies and everyone has to play their part for the show to succeed. But, more so than most teams, theatrical performers have to rehearse their work, and collective performance is so valued that everyone involved gets listed in the credits. Being seen as a cast is also distinctive. Show business has an undeniable cachet. Recognizing this, top entertainment, dining, and transportation companies—Disney, Hard Rock Cafe, and Southwest Airlines among them—have dramatized their customer service and staged it.

*. . . because actors are playing and the experience is “make believe,” they can reflect from a distance and . . . learn something about their art and themselves.*

### *Do versus Act*

While *do* and *act* seem synonymous, acting, as performativity, has some distinguishing features. The creation of an alternative reality through play frees imagination, generates energy, and opens possibilities for new directions. In turn, precisely because actors are playing and the experience is “make believe,” they can reflect from a distance and, in so doing, learn something about their art and themselves. Certainly, the use of role play in management training and of psychodramas in clinical settings is based on these assumptions.

Acting out new behavior can have an impact on individuals and companies that extends beyond any particular performance. Consider the experience (and its limitations) through the eyes of two Dutch managers:

For a couple of days, you’re in a completely different surrounding. Flying in an airplane, biking, and canoeing is something you don’t do every day. You’re more or less lost, so all the experiences have an impact on you as a person and on your work with your colleagues.

Today I would describe the company culture as playful. Playful, loose, creative . . . changing directions. Playing is good; you are open to new possibilities. What is lacking is a clear purpose. What’s the next thing we have to do? We have to start moving in a direction, and I don’t see that movement.

### *Manager versus Director*

We do not need to repeat the countless tracts telling managers to orchestrate, choreograph, coach, and in other ways add to the artistry of organizational performance. But managers can benefit from artistic sensibilities and skills. They have the authority and responsibility to ensure the integrity of a performance—its narrative, presentation, and flow. They should also have an eye for symbolism and ear for what sounds flat. Gunning has remarked:

There is the managing of intangibles. And it is the integration of these intangibles that makes the difference. I can work on people’s emotions; I can work on people’s intellect. But in the end, I want to integrate this at continuous, higher levels. So the cumulative effect of events, of walking your talk, of being consistent in your beliefs is integration at a higher level.

### *Deliver versus Delight*

The distinction between the sought-after end of process versus performance is admittedly arbitrary. Nevertheless, there is a tendency in process management to focus so much on concrete, measurable deliverables that creativity and fun are simply driven from the process. In the service of efficiency and to gain predictability and control, processes become compartmentalized, routinized, and lifeless. In many instances, processes are equated with bureaucracy, so to put an idea “through a process” is akin to slowly killing it.

Performances, by comparison, aim to delight in their delivery, reinforcing the aesthetic agenda and reminding us of the life-giving power of art. Of course, there are many mass-produced performances and many creative ones that prove mediocre or miss their mark. The performances that we have discussed here tried to embody and promote aspirations for change. These deliverables and their delivery necessarily include the intangibles that Gunning mentioned and artistry in the overall production.

Context contributes to the success of performance. In studies of performance, the social drama of life and the aesthetic drama of performance are depicted in a figure eight, with each either contributing to or detracting from the other. A Dutch employee and cast member spoke about the all-staff learning conference:

The learning conference is not just an event in itself. With no continuity, with no team building, we would not have results. We are one small company in Delft, but we are working with 1,800 people. We talked about ourselves in business, about the power we had in our own hands. People spoke about their own practice, not from the book, but from their experience. For me, that is gold.

## Performing and Learning

Marking progress and creating change in organizations via events is still a new idea. Despite managers' and scholars' budding interest in performativity, there is not much wisdom or tested practice on staging performances that simultaneously inform, stimulate, and develop individual and collective capabilities. The performances we've described here shared certain design characteristics:

- Leaders performed actively and visibly with staff members by legitimizing theatrics and role modeling.
- Experiences were staged to engage individuals and groups. The rationale was to build capacity from the bottom up and stimulate change from the inside out. The performances also worked from the top down, and energy and direction came from the outside.
- Each scene engaged multiple senses, and sequences employed multiple media. The leader retreats and all-staff learning conferences were "happenings."
- Each event appealed to the head and the heart. In terms of performance and its aesthetic impact, the twin criteria for judging success were whether the experience was intellectually convincing and emotionally appealing.

Our history validated that the warehouse wake-up call, orange-hat skating promotion, team leaders' gathering in the Ardennes, and the learning history effort in Jordan more than met these criteria.

## Part II. Making History in the Desert of Jordan

*Karen Ayas*

### Passing the Torch

I catch myself weeping along with many others. His voice muffled by tears, I barely hear him say, "That's it; I am gone now." We are in Ed Deir—a Nabataean monastery built into an immense cliff face in Petra, Jordan. This is the final scene of the drama, which is at its peak. He continues, "I am leaving. You can do it. But you have to reinvent yourselves."

After four days in the desert in Wadi Rum, reflecting on the past five years they have worked together, 200 leaders of the business are gathered to say goodbye to their leader, Tex Gunning. I did not know most of them five days ago, and now I feel as one of them. I celebrated their successes, I witnessed their breakthroughs, and now I share their pain.

The setting and staging is perfect for this grand finale. Gunning and his "tribe leaders" (six business unit leaders) are in a small, elevated chamber, the tribe leaders standing in a semicircle behind Gunning, facing the audience. The little light penetrating the

monastery is projected onto them. The acoustics allow us to hear every breath. Gunning steps down after what seems like endless applause, passing the torch to his successor, the new chairman. The two keep hugging each other, through tears and cheers.

This was not in the script, I think to myself. And I am not sure that there ever was a script. There was absolutely no way to predict how this scene would play out. Until the last minute, we were not even sure that the new chairman would be there. But there is no question that the scene had been carefully staged. Many hours had gone into the meticulous design of this event, seeking to create, scene by scene, just the right setting and circumstances. Gunning is both the producer and lead actor. All the participants created the performance and didn't know the script. They played their parts, and the actions unfolded.

Once I manage to detach myself from the effects of the drama, I am filled with awe and delight. I feel relieved that it has ended, far better than I could have imagined. Given the complicated logistics, the multitude of actors, and the lack of coordination, so many things could have gone wrong.

## The Event

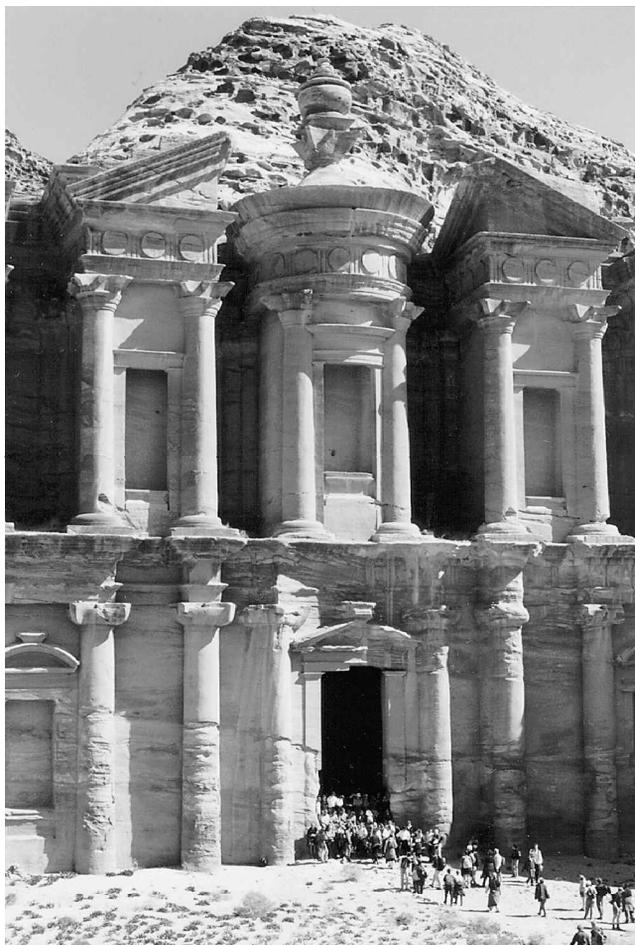
*Day 1.* We welcome the 200 leaders to Jerusalem. Gunning sets the stage by addressing the question of why we are here. After a half-day experiencing Jerusalem, we head south. We stop for a swim in the Dead Sea and then continue on until we reach the Jordanian border. Once we cross the border, the tribes (business units) separate into different campsites. After a two-hour, bumpy jeep ride in the dark, we end at a Bedouin campsite in the desert. Tents are set up; there is food and a campfire. It is a beautiful night. The first day has been all about getting there, both physically and emotionally. We are all exhausted and go to sleep.

*Day 2.* We wake to the sounds of camels. We are in the middle of an immense desert of pink sand and multicolored rocks. We leave on an hour's camel ride. Camels are the most relaxed animals: as they eat, they walk. They seem to be in tune with the majestic scenery. As we continue our ride, other groups of camels appear on the horizon, each coming from a different direction. We dismount and form a big circle; the tribes are called on to unite for their new mission. We have started a long "process" day, mostly engaged in reflective conversations while perched on rocks.

We spend the morning on visioning and the afternoon in deep discussion of what had been significant during the past five years. In preparation for the event, team leaders had been asked to reflect on their individual history, major breakthroughs, and significant moments. Now, as a unit, they construct their learning history. At the end of the day, we share everything around a huge fire. We form a big circle with each tribe holding banners documenting their most significant learnings. We return in pairs to our campsites in the dark, sharing personal visions. Conversations about business and personal stories continue into the night.

*Day 3.* We spend a whole day riding in jeeps on bumpy roads. Each time we stop, we switch jeeps and continue to share learnings from the previous day. The last stretch of the ride is spectacular and dangerous, with increasingly challenging curves and narrow roads atop cliffs. Just as it gets dark, we reach our campsite, all tribes now united at one site. The community feeling is enhanced by a huge campfire in the middle and caves surrounding us.

*Day 4.* We leave the campsite early on a five-hour hike to Petra. This scenic trail has many dangerous passages leading to the monastery on top of the mountain. All ascend for the final scene: the passing of the torch. We spend two hours visiting Petra and then check into a hotel and celebrate until 3 AM.



© Karen Ayas

## The "Miracle"

In one of the many meetings in preparation for this event, I recall Gunning saying:

We need this emergent thing—continuous feeling and sensing and changing plans accordingly. Keeping in touch with what is happening moment by moment. Because that is when miracles happen. Everything is interrelated and needs to follow a particular sequence. If one misses out on one tiny little decision, it may all fall apart.

In this event, the magic, or the "miracle" as Gunning refers to it, is twofold:

1. In producing change—the mix of planning and improvisation that leads to timely action, allowing the desired change to unfold.
2. In performing change—the intensity and profoundness of engagement in the change process, as individuals and as a community.

Only a few had been involved in the initial production of this learning performance. Aside from the external facilitators and the outdoor event organizers, no one knew where the group was going. In preparation, Gunning met with the tribe leaders, who in turn were responsible for preparing the leaders of their respective units. The tribe leaders were briefed about the logistics only after they arrived in Jerusalem, but still didn't know where they would be spending the next four days.

A group of about 20, including tribe leaders and internal and external facilitators, spent a half-day in Jerusalem to prepare for the event before all the team leaders arrived. Gunning used about half the time to communicate clearly his vision for revolutionary growth and his message—the need for them to reinvent themselves as individuals and as a business if they were to survive in the new economy. Little guidance was provided in terms of the process. Little time was spent on clarifying roles. No debriefing time among facilitators of the different units was included.

There could have been chaos, with people not knowing where they were going physically or what was next in the process, or with tribe leaders and facilitators trying to follow a changing program. Yet people played their roles impeccably, each leader producing part of the script in the performance. Though uncoordinated, all actions and interventions happened in a timely fashion, and things fell into place with a little nudge here and there, in synchronicity.

The underlying lack of control increased the sense of drama and created circumstances that brought people even closer. People were not preoccupied with the logistics; they were living every scene, moment by moment. They were in this together, but not because they felt helpless or feared what would happen next.

The design of the event and the staging were constrained by the logistical requirements. There were some process steps that didn't make sense. The jeep rides, for instance, were terrible conditions for conducting highly personal, significant conversations, yet, they worked beautifully. Some of the major breakthroughs came during lunch break. Every tribe gathered on its own, doing whatever was needed.

## Observations

Of the 200 leaders, only one had been to Petra before and a few to Israel. Roughly half work in factories. Most live in Oss, a small town in the south of Holland. Some had never been on an airplane. For many of them, this could have been just an incredible trip. But all they saw was Jerusalem for two hours and Petra for two hours. The rest of the time they worked, engaging in yet one more important conversation.

After arriving at a campfire following eight hours of riding in jeeps and three days of hard work, there might have been a big party. Instead, people chose to resume their work. Even after the grand finale, when they were told it was time to stop, some groups decided to continue their dialogues.

The group's energy was nearly palpable. They were engaged both emotionally and intellectually in shaping their future, helping each other in the process. In a few days, leaders from six different units became one big family. They spent hours listening to each others' stories, learning from each others' successes and failures, and sharing their personal visions. Perspectives shifted; many conflicts were resolved.

## Interpretations

I base my observations on what I saw and felt at the moment. It is possible to question to what extent an organization can really be transformed or how much magic remains. Still, much was achieved in a few days, and the use of sacred space appeared to be instrumental.

I cannot overstate the compelling nature of the desert. Wadi Rum is a majestic place where I immediately felt in harmony with the universe. My frame of reference shifted: there was something much bigger than I was, and I felt part of it. Engaging in dialogue and addressing business issues in such a space of grace opens new possibilities. People can think with their hearts and souls, where they can be emotional and not be constrained by intellect.

Such an event engages people on a path to personal growth and aligns individual and business goals. The setting opens possibilities not only for the business but also for the individual, resulting in many new insights and revelations. Since these personal breakthroughs occur in a business event, among colleagues, bringing your whole self to the work gets easier. Sharing your deepest fears and aspirations builds a strong basis for trust and a community of commitment.

Working on personal vision in the context of the business creates the inevitable connection and interdependency between personal and business breakthroughs.

*These events were staged to create intellectually convincing and emotionally appealing experiences.*

## The Bigger Picture

VdBN has had other miraculous events. During the past five years, the company has used large-scale events to launch, develop, or deepen the transformation process. These events were staged to create intellectually convincing and emotionally appealing experiences. Such memorable events have developed learning capabilities at the individual, group, and collective levels and accelerated the transformation.

Reflecting on the role and impact of the events, Gunning says:

I always see three major things in these events. One, you bring the people to a certain space so that you can approach them emotionally. You cannot do this in the office. Therefore, you start to integrate intellect and emotion.

Second, you benefit from the dynamics of large groups, so you can move faster. In an organization, you can work on transformation one by one or team by team, but that is not fast enough. And by bringing the cynics and skeptics into these events, in four days, they begin to move with the large group. Everyone becomes connected to the transformation.

Third is the gift issue. If you do it properly, people accept the events as a gift or a reward of sorts—the travel, the experience, and the investment in personal growth.

Both the production (script and staging) and the performance (acting) of these events are an artful practice; it cannot be reduced to a few principles. There is no blueprint for reproducing it. As in any performance, much depends on the producers and actors, with no guarantee that the performance will give the audience what it needs or that the event will create the desired progress.

Eric-Jan de Rooij, organizer of outdoor events, comments:

When you have these events, you go into them with a certain mindset of what you want to get. And you never get exactly what you want. You can provide the space for people to open up. You can direct, follow the energy, and feel the breakpoint. Such an event is like a magnifying glass. You can really see where your company is, and people can see each other. With such transparency, you can easily define the next steps. But strong leadership is the key to the success of the event and to what happens afterward.

My own conclusion is that while we may never discover the secret to a successful event, it is the practice that makes the difference. In the acting, people change. Each performance may not be better, but with each performance, people change for the better.

## Part III. Design for Learning

*George L. Roth*

Learning from experience is something that every individual does naturally. We think and act to achieve our goals, and then rethink, react, and regroup when we find that our efforts have been unsuccessful. But as individuals, we aren't perfect learners. Many factors of which we are not aware affect our performance. We aren't always thorough or systematic about connecting objectives, actions, and outcomes so that we can test and refine our understanding of how things work. And our drives to make the world more understandable often lead us to develop simple rules of thumb for complex situations. For these reasons, there is increased interest in how we can learn *collectively*, hence, the interest in organizational learning.

Research into organizational learning has focused on describing, developing, and testing conditions that support collective learning. One such effort, developed initially to capture and diffuse what can be learned from managing change, involves learning histories. In developing a learning history, people work together to assess and learn from actions and results. The process of assessing and learning together produces a "jointly told tale" about significant events (Roth and Kleiner, 2000; Kleiner and Roth, 2000). The resulting document presents retrospective accounts of people's key experiences, in their own words. The stories come from those who initiated, implemented, participated in, and were affected by the effort. We edit and weave together quotes to produce an account from different perspectives. We pay attention to literary standards in telling powerful stories. The metaphor we evoke is that of the campfire story, as if everyone were sitting around the campfire telling his or her version, respectfully breaking in or building on the previous speaker.

The document becomes an artifact from which new groups can discuss what happened, why, and how it applies to them and their actions. As people read, discuss, and reflect on the work of others, learning historians try to recreate an experience from which they learn. The experience itself is a learning intervention—in its telling through interviews, production by an inside-outside team of historians, and validation through quote checking, and in its reception in reading and discussion sessions.

*The process of assessing and learning together produces a "jointly told tale" about significant events.*



© George L. Roth

What makes the learning history of VdBN unique is the effort to integrate it directly into the transformation of the business. It was very much part of a “performance” involving Gunning and his team leaders. Indeed, the first stage of the history-writing process, begun in Jordan, compared lessons from the past about growth and change to aspirations for continued transformation and future growth. It was designed to produce creative tension between current achievements and what could be accomplished with further breakthroughs in business understanding and collective resolve.

The first day included a visit to the old city of Jerusalem, a place of overt, palpable historic significance. During the event, people passed Mesada (which the Jews defended against King Herod), and the caves in Qumran (where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found). We met in Wadi Rum (where Lawrence of Arabia gathered Bedouin tribes) and climbed a mountain to descend into the Nabataean civilization of Petra (where sandstone cliffs are etched with the facades of the architectural styles of Egypt, Greece, and Rome). Western civilization has been shaped by the history that comes from these places. The choice of these learning locales was not accidental, but made one question—how history shapes us—real and immediate.

In preparation for the Jordan event, team leaders reflected on their personal history with VdBN through a time line. In Jordan, after team leaders worked on their units’ history, they presented their thoughts on banners to each other. Everyone could hear how the past affected different parts of the organization. In turn, visions of a collective future were set in the context of others’ experiences. Later, as the team leaders took their learning back to the organization, they compared the “lessons learned” with their staff’s personal lessons about change. They presented the team stories to others at the learning conference and included them in the history book that each team created. The books covered each team’s history, vision for the future, and lessons from the past on which they wanted to build.

Even as people in VdBN created their own history books for learning, a small team of insiders and outsiders followed the more typical learning history process of collecting data through interviews with individuals and groups. This learning history effort is aimed at the outside world, including audiences within other parts of Unilever. We expect that managers will find reflection on the use of performances in transformation interesting and challenging. We encourage them to design a learning performance, wherein the making of a learning history is itself a history-making event.

## Part IV. Final Reflections

At VdBN, we helped to create a learning history about two transformations that had unusual features and compelling results. To the extent that the methodology differed from the standard format (which is itself still novel and experimental), it is appropriate to close with some thoughts about the change process, the research effort, and their commingling as performances.

First, the best practices identified by the learning history, both soft and hard, are familiar to academics and experienced change managers. Indeed, discussions of them produced a lot of head nodding among team leaders in Jordan and at the 2000 VdBN learning conference. This indicates how the company’s team leaders have learned about change over the years. Yet systematically identifying key transformational events, documenting the actions, distilling conceptual themes, and deriving lessons added rigor to their understanding about change management on site and weight to conclusions about its impact on people and the business.

Our emphasis on the artful combination of practices, or “holistic integration,” as key to success is no doubt agreeable to most scholars and appreciated by managers. But the research yielded no “models” on holistic practice per se. How artful actions connect causally to changes in people’s attitudes, behaviors, and business results is, at best, speculative. In the same way, it is foolish to assume that the practices documented can be applied in a “cookbook” fashion. As Gunning remarked, “I have tried the cookbook. It doesn’t work.”

As for the significance of the performative events, the jury is out and must remain so. Certainly, the notion that organizational change follows nonlinear, reciprocally causal, and unpredictable directions is not new. Nor is the idea that to understand and appreciate such



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patterns, we might turn to nontraditional forms of assessment, such as storytelling, video documentary, and performance art (Michael and Mirvis, 1977; Mirvis, 1980). In viewing VdBN's transformation as a series of "performances," we suggest that it be judged partly in *aesthetic* terms. It unfolded through different acts, sets, and scenes. The improvised script built on prior events, dramatized current situations, and set the stage, figuratively and practically, for what happened next. The methods and criteria of literary and theatrical critics, and of the performing art scholarship more generally, would provide a rigorous if subjective means for gauging the transformation of VdBN in its aesthetic dimensions.

When we assess this transformation as an art form that has engaged and changed a community of people, however, it seems less appropriate to use these tools or to tease out the key performative elements that made it work. When looking at a painting, we can attend to details such as brush strokes, lighting, colors, and shapes, or focus on the arrangement of the canvas and its framing, but in the end, what matters is how the painting strikes the viewer. In his commentary on the validity of art, Polanyi observed that its "truth" lay in the *experience* it creates for those who see the artwork or, in this case, participate in the performance (Polyani, Prosch, and Prosch, 1977).

The learning history was both part of and contributor to the transformation of VdBN. When performing, actors tend to take on and become their roles and, with artistic license, dramatize and orient themselves for effect. Certainly, we as researchers had this concern when we heard rapturous accounts of the Ardennes event or watched evocative videos of other meaningful events in the company's transformational time line. We would "check" for bias by probing people's positive experiences at events and challenging them to show demonstrable results of their impact. At the same time, the goal of helping people look inward, backward, and forward to learn from experience is one with which we identified and tried to bring about. Thus our probing and challenging had less to do with objectifying the experience for academic purposes and more to do with advancing the learning agenda on site.

Conflicts between action and research are commonplace and create their share of dilemmas (Mirvis, 1985). The twist here is that, in Jordan and at VdBN's learning conference, we ourselves were part of the show. We were assuming roles and performing on stage, had license to dramatize, and had effects we wanted to achieve. Clearly, this is not the norm for fieldwork, and our participation in staging a meaningful event no doubt influenced the way we see things and report on them. In that way, our experience is parallel to that of the VdBN staff and managers. We have to check our own biases in reporting what happened and what is to be learned.

Not all aspects of the performances at VdBN, including in Jordan, were intellectually, emotionally, or aesthetically compelling. There were flops. As producer and direc-

tor, Gunning had his own failings, and, as he has said, his performance was not always on the mark. Of greater concern going forward is his centrality to the transformation. We wonder whether change management by performance can or even should continue at VdBN as the staff undertakes another transformation and Gunning moves on.

The extent to which his approach to change management can be generalized to other firms and leaders is questionable. In many companies, planned change processes seem rote, and the experience is grinding and ultimately defeating. Adding performativity to the change process at VdBN made it playful, meaningful, and ultimately rewarding. One indication of this approach's validity is that selected team leaders have begun to stage learning performances for their own businesses and teams. We will continue to examine whether leaders in other companies carry performativity further.

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## Commentary

by Bill Torbert

June 12, 2000, journal entry. The S-4 meeting of a dozen or so SoL (Society for Organizational Learning) consultants and researchers occurred today. S-4 represents what we need to learn in our efforts to generate the transformational alchemy of individual, team, organizational, and even societal learning that the new economy calls for. The four Ss stand for "Speed, Scale, Scope, and Sustainability." And, as Otto Scharmer has said, this formulation misses the fifth and most important S, namely, our Selves. Or, as Adam Kahane mentioned after today's meeting, he has adjusted the sixties bumper sticker, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem," to read, "If you don't realize you're part of the problem, you're certainly not part of the solution."

In a previous S-4 meeting, I had presented a case concerning my role on a major corporate board of directors when the organization achieved remarkable results, such as a merger, a spin-off, a number one ranking in its industry, \$100 million losses two years in a row, the firing of the CEO, and the board-initiated resignation of the entire board. One striking learning from this experience is that all three CEOs who shared responsibility for the losses had, in their previous CEO roles, successfully generated organizational transformation and had always produced positive business results. Then all three failed in one way or another in this different environment (during a downturn for the whole industry).

Based on their past experiences, these CEOs believed that they were part of the solution and, thereby, without realizing it, became part of the problem. They invoked again the charms (or miracles! [Lichtenstein, 1997]) that they had learned would work during their previous leadership transformations. In particular, the CEO who was fired did not seem to recognize the difference be-



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tween his previous situation and this one. Therefore, he tried again the recipe he had previously learned for success, rather than engaging in transformational learning again. (During his earlier success, this had been the core of his genius; he had modeled transformation by transforming himself. But, like most of us, he did not recognize the core of his own genius.)

At that same S-4 meeting, another member also presented a case. Karen Ayas had just jetted in after dancing all night in Jordan at the conclusion of an extraordinary five-day pilgrimage by some 200 members of a corporate leadership team. With eye-popping enthusiasm, she regaled us with the extraordinarily flamboyant transformational exploits and business results of Tex Gunning, the CEO of VdBN, and his leadership team. In the past three years, the CEO has configured adventures for his widening leadership team to the forest of the Ardennes, to Scotland, and to Israel and Petra.

When Gunning shared his emotional life story at the Ardennes meeting, both he and the senior team thereby modeled the significance of each leader in the company becoming a part of the solution by examining how he or she contributes to the problem. Will this transforming Dutch CEO suffer the same fate as the CEO with whom I interacted as a fellow board member? Will his successful personal and corporate transformation experience make him believe that he is now only part of the solution and blind him to the new notes he will find in his own eye in his new circumstances?

Karen Ayas presented the case again at today's S-4 meeting and brought with her a member from VdBN, George Roth, and Phil Mirvis. Karen also showed videotapes that the company uses to remind and attune the company's 2,000 members to the major events in its recent history, including footage of the meetings in the Ardennes and Jordan. These four participants told us the story from many perspectives, including the year-by-year dramatic improvement in business results. They then invited us to question them, to help them think about the key issues in this learning history, and to suggest its primary audience. Is the primary audience Tex Gunning himself, off to his new assignment in Asia? Or is it the new CEO of VdBN and the leaders reinventing the company once again? Is it VdBN's parent company that says it wants to foster an entrepreneurial culture across its more than 100 operating companies? Or is the primary audience all executives and scholars who are interested in generating organizational transformation and improved business results? Or are you and I, trying to improve our lives in organizations, whatever our current positions may be, the proper primary audience?

The company member who was with us at the S-4 meeting mentioned that Gunning is not very impressive in person; certainly, he does not appear impressive to me on the videotape. According to the company member, what is convincing about him is that he is always authentically trying to learn and deal with the current issues; this seems to be the source of his integrity. From the examples offered, some of us cited this "unimpressive" leader's evident ability to repeatedly "do the right thing at the right time," integrating immediate business issues and grandiose, symbolic, emotional gestures that shift the company's culture.

But how does one teach such ongoing authentic inquiry and timely action, when it must not replicate any past pattern, but rather reconstruct such patterns to meet the unique requirements of the present? How can we learn to reflect on the past, while increasingly "presencing" into what is going on now, and simultaneously lead toward the emerging future? How can we learn to act and inquire simultaneously, both in a timely fashion? Or, putting the same question differently, how can we learn to enact, and simultaneously to inquire about, our own innermost assumptions and our intended outermost effects?

During our "check-in" at the outset of the S-4 meeting, we had each cited our current dilemmas or victories, illustrating repeatedly that these difficult questions on how to integrate inquiry and action in the present concern our intimate relationships, our spiritual inquiry, and our whole lives even more than our work. Given today's furious pace, how can we simultaneously inquire and take timely action throughout our lives?

We must learn the secret of how to simultaneously take leadership and conduct research in ongoing real-time. Our inquiry must guide us and others into the "perpetual present" (Jaques, 1982; Scharmer, 2000)—that inclusive present, where the traces of the past meet the emerging future (Fisher, Rooke, and Torbert, 2000).

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