

# Archetypes of Sustainability

## Toward a Hopeful Paradigm of Organizational Development

By David Sibbet

During the 25 years I have been an organizational consultant, working around the world for all kinds of organizations in both the private and the public sectors, a question has nagged at me, growing stronger with each passing year. My search for an answer is the story behind this article.

This is the question.

1. Is there a way to think about organizational development without defining growth in strictly materialistic and quantitative terms?

If you resonate with this question, then the framework of thinking about organizational development described in this article will be very exciting, as it has been for me over the 20 years of its development. If you don't care about this questions, you might be intrigued to understand why I think it is so important, for I do believe that the very sustainability of human life on earth is dependent on our finding an answer. This article provides an introduction to this quest.

### **Drivers Behind Needing a New Way of Thinking**

Let me start by listing some of the real or perceived pressures that are driving a need to look at organizational evolution in a fundamentally new way.

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- Scientists now agree that the Earth is undergoing a 6<sup>th</sup> great extinction of living species, at the same time that research showing the interdependence of living things is growing rapidly.
- Meteorologists agree that the Earth is warming rapidly, and that massive climate change will be part of our near term future, disrupting many patterns of agriculture and its related economies.
- Corporations are both growing larger at unprecedented scales, and proliferating at the smaller end of the spectrum. Current industrial-mechanical models for characterizing these phenomena are breaking down.
- Getting results for shareholders has assumed paramount importance for public companies, and pushes leadership to focus short term and treat employees as costs.
- Free market practices often mean “free to exploit” when exported to less regulated, underdeveloped areas of the globe, with increasingly devastating impacts.
- The explosive growth in bio-sciences has allowed increasing numbers of people to understand the dynamics of living systems, and appreciate that organizations are eco-systems in continuous interaction with their environments.
- A growing number of people believe that spirit, intuition, inner purpose, and core values are central to the health of human society, and to our organizations. Science-based models of organizations allow little room for consideration of these qualities.

It is not the purpose of this article to prove or disprove these assertions, but state them as a context for exploring the possibility of thinking about organizational

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sustainability in some new ways, evolving toward a paradigm that respects and works with the wisdom of living systems.

#### **Is a New Paradigm Possible?**

It might seem audacious to think that a new paradigm (holistic system of understanding) can be invented, but that is precisely what Arthur M. Young said he was doing when I first encountered him at his Institute for the Study of Consciousness in Berkeley, California, in 1976. A professor friend from MIT who was out west researching the consciousness movement suggested I attend Young's Saturday seminar. "He's the only person in the movement I found who has a disciplined theory," Jack Saloma said, "and he explains it with geometry!"

This was the hook I needed. I had just discovered organizational development as a field, and was about to set out on a consulting career. I was spring boarding from eight years doing leadership training with the Coro Foundation, an operating foundation conducting nine-month long fellowships in public affairs for a dozen fellows a year—with a 100% experiential model. I and other staff had been in a froth of invention finding ways to get the Fellows to learn from their internships, action projects, interviews, and field trips without our lecturing. Among other things, we had developed large-scale, graphic recording as a way to support Coro groups doing system-level thinking in a group. By 1976 I was deeply involved in articulating "Group Graphics®" as a facilitation tool and was ready to do this work full-time. I was also in pursuit of new models of thinking, stimulated by Coro's use of General Semantics (GS) as a meta-language for teaching Fellows to think about thinking. Alfred Korzybski, the author of GS's seminal work, *Science and Sanity*, was quite convinced that traps in the English language were

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responsible for all kinds of insanity. We were convinced the same problems existed within peoples' ways of visualizing about organizations.

At the seminar I attended in 1976 I experienced Young describing a Theory of Process—the outgrowth of a Princeton degree in physics and mathematics, and thirty years of study after successfully solving the age-old problem of helicopter flight (he invented the world's first commercially licensed helicopter—the Bell 47). Young invited us to apply his assumptions to the worlds we understood and tell him where it broke down. He asserted that science itself had discovered that “action” rather than matter was fundamental to the entire universe. After studying the physics of light—the quantum of action of the photon—he saws that the photon was the scientific representation of what philosophy and religion name “first cause.” The journey of the photon into material manifestation, then life, portrays universal process.

I joined his study group and for ten years applied the Theory of Process to group and organizational process. Others applied his work to politics, bioscience, physics, and literature. I can't describe the process of discovery we all went through in this short article (if you are interested Young's website is [www.arthuryoung.com](http://www.arthuryoung.com)) but I can describe the result, which was the discovery of a framework that allowed us to make sense of organizational evolution in a radically new way that substitutes growth in complexity and understanding for growth in mass as a paradigm for success.

### **Young Solves a Graphic Mapping Problem**

Since Descartes, a popular way of mapping numbers on charts is to show “0” at the crossing of an “x” and “y” axis. Quantitative models and diagrams show

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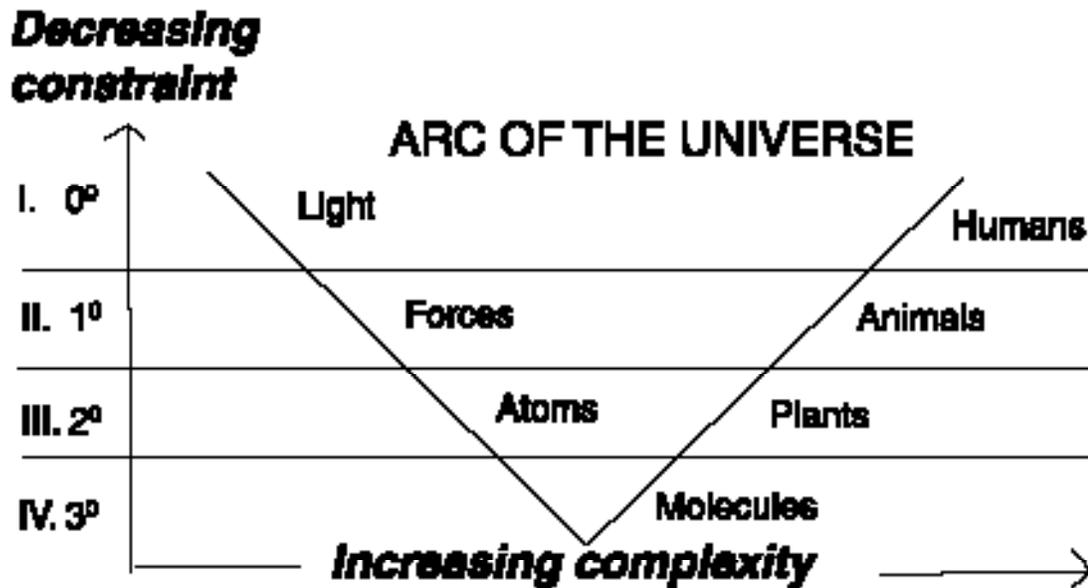
progress “up and to the right”, in a way that has become almost iconic in business. Quantity equals success. Bigger is better. Growth equals growth in revenue and employees.

This convention extends to more than numbers. Team building models often portray a series of stair steps moving up and to the right, borrowing the industrial-mechanical metaphor of “building” to suggest the steady increase in capability.

The “S” curve, mapped on Cartesian coordinates, is ubiquitous as a way to describe business growth. The exploration stage sags down on the left; the growth part is a rocket ride up and to the right; maturity, the third stage, starts to flatten. All this suggests that when your quantitative prowess droops, so does everything else, including stock prices, number of employees, market share, etc. etc.

This “objectivist” perspective is so embedded in our operating system it is often accepted as the truth—not just a map.

Young flipped the Cartesian coordinates on their head to show how process works in nature, and in all the phenomena he and our study group looked at, including organizations. In his framework, constraint—the manifest physical world was the “0” point, indicates “no freedom.” The “y” axis became decreasing degrees of constraint (or increasing degrees of freedom) to the point of no constraint, a position occupied only by light—and by human consciousness that happens to have a unique ability to work with light. The “x” axis indicates increasing complexity, not quantity. The overall scheme looked like this when used to describe classic evolution of phenomena studied by science.



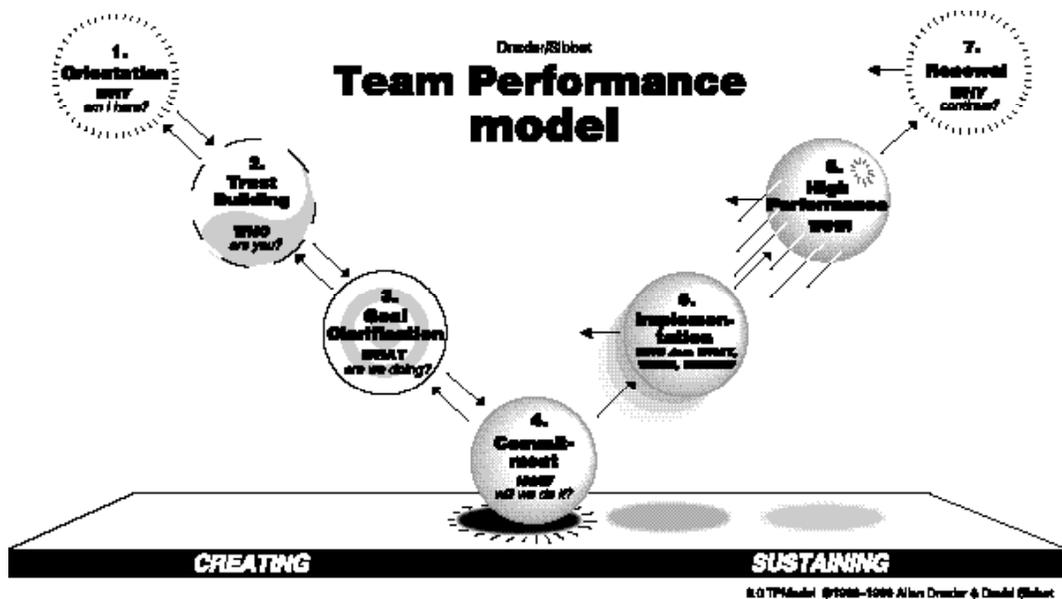
Process in nature begins with nothing but potential—light as a quanta of action. It must take on some constraints to have something to work with. In nature light becomes fundamental forces at the level of electrons and protons, and then atoms, and finally molecules, in a hierarchy of functional dependency (i.e. molecules depend on atoms, atoms depend on fundamental particles or forces, and all these are dependent on the existence of light).

I saw an immediate parallel with the contention of Robert Fritz (Page 55) that system creativity comes from resolving the structural tension between visions and current reality—the level where we are free to imagine and the levels where we are constrained by the physical world. I could also see that this pattern describes teams, a microcosm of the larger organization. Some purpose triggers a team's creation, and takes on some direction when people enroll in the project and

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trust its leadership, and become more defined as goals become clarified, and finally manifests as a real team when commitments of resources are made and agreed on schedules are adopted.

Visualizing this arc of process as the now widely used Drexler/Sibbet Team Performance™ Model was one of the first projects I took on in applying the Theory of Process to Organizations.



This model departs markedly from more linear, building block models in showing the all important "turn" when a system discovers the rules that govern its constraints, and uses them to regain freedom through more complex organization. In nature this happens when molecules discover replication through the DNA, regaining the freedom of growth through chain structures. All plants embody some kind of chaining or branching structure Young demonstrated. Drexler and I

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realized that teams are also moving to sequencing structures when they begin implementing and capture the same freedom of growth.

When nature discovered arms and legs in the linking protein molecules, they could eventually manifest as animal systems, which found a way to master space through movement. Teams did the same when their feedback and communications “arms and legs” provided conceptual mobility and the capability of not just hitting goals, but changing them.

Nature assumes its most complex form in humans, who are capable of processing light directly in their developed, bi-cameral nervous systems. Without engaging the argument of whether or not humans are the last word in evolution, we could see that when a team invests in learning from its experience, and generating an awareness of the general patterns behind its work, that this represented a renewal stage.

### **Toward a Framework for Organizational Evolution**

My jump to understanding that Young’s arc of process could describe organizations came when I discovered Larry Greiner’s classic HBR article, *Organization Evolution and Revolution*, initially published in 1972 and reprinted in 1999 with an update. He was tackling the problem of describing why revolutionary or disruptive change was as much a part of organizational development as evolutionary, or incremental change. His ideas seemed very resonant with Young’s.

Greiner described organizations as moving in patterns of incremental evolution and periods of crisis or revolution, not dissimilar to the “turns” Young described. In

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1999 Greiner writes " We continue to observe major phases of development in the life of growing companies, lasting anywhere from 3-15 years each... and transitions between developmental phases still do not occur naturally or smoothly, regardless of the strength of top management." (1999). He outlined five stages and five crises.

1. Creativity phase, disrupted by a leadership crisis
2. Direction phase, disrupted by a crisis of autonomy
3. Delegation phase, disrupted by a crisis of control
4. Coordination phase, disrupted by red tape
5. Collaboration phase, disrupted by ?

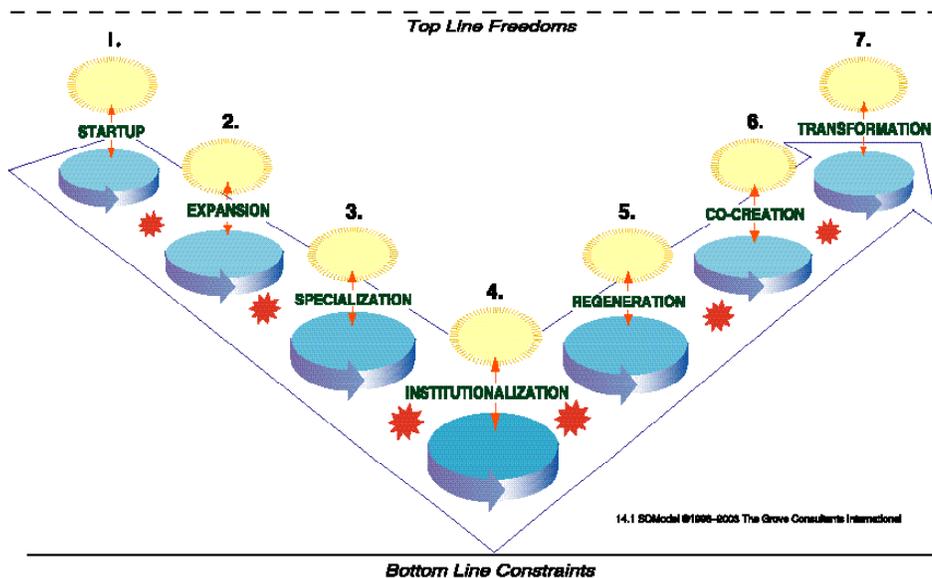
By 2003, Greiner and Young's understanding that dynamic systems fluctuate between periods of stability and chaos is widespread, and described in many ways.

Tushman and O'Reilly use the familiar "s" curve to illustrate the range of organizational cultures that need to be managed in an ambidextrous organization (Page 23) and indicate that early, middle, and mature stages are interrupted by revolutionary periods of change. Land and Jarman have a similar scheme in *Breakpoint and Beyond* (page 17), again using the "S" curve. Adizes in his *Corporate Lifecycles* analogizes organizational cycles with the stages of life in a human being, and illustrates these as a bell curve (page 88), with each phase capable of wiskering into decline. Moore in his *Crossing the Chasm*, uses the familiar bell curve of innovation to show how different organizations adapt to phases of the technology adoption cycle, and indicates a "chasm" or period of chaos, that must be jumped in order to succeed (page 17).

All of these expressions, including Greiner, describe key parts of the elephant of organizational evolution, but miss the bigger picture that Young worked to describe, which was evolution as an arc that did not have quantitative growth as its primary axis. In looking at Greiner's theory in the late '70s it was apparent to me he had not described this idea of the "turn". Nor did he have an idea of where the process might lead after collaboration.

### The Sibbet/LeSaget Stages of Organization Model

My first integration of Young and Greiner created a seed from which our Stages of Organization Model grew. Each stage achieves its stability by having a creative tension between visions (indicated by circles of light) and realities (shown as medallions or platforms). Laid out on a freedom-constraint axis it looked like this.



Mapping Greiner onto Young, the initial stages felt very. "Startups" run by entrepreneurs eventually have to find direction in an "Expansion" or growth

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phase. As others emulate, a crisis in identity leads to "Specialization." After the third stage I felt that Greiner had left out one, the "commitment" stage—the "turn." I labeled this "Institutionalization" when applied to organizations. This is the stage where a successfully differentiated company, with enough clarity in its strategy to specialize its value proposition and offering, and sustain returns on that basis, faces the challenge of getting these return regularly, and masters the processes and procedures so completely that it can survive its founders.

Clearly this stage might be the end of the road. But Greiner saw "coordination" and "collaboration" stages as waiting for realization.

I appreciated that what Greiner called "coordination" could be seen as the move by an organization to master the adaptation of its processes to new markets and new products, thereby re-achieving the kind of growth associated with early expansion stages that have usually been challenged by the maturation of an organization. But in my work with organizations applying re-engineering and other productivity strategies to this phase, I felt the essence was more than coordination. What really wanted to happen was a shift from a mechanistic to an ecological way of thinking, and discovery of the regeneration processes so evident in the plant world. Calling this stage "Regeneration" pointed to this possibility. It also suggests that a key to this is lightening the mass of the organization and increasing its disciplined understanding of process.

I went on to see that what Greiner called "collaboration" was the stage when an organization realizes that on-going innovation is utterly dependent on networking with a value web within a larger industry, importing new ideas from trusted partners, and playing roles in a more dynamic and adapting eco-system rather

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than going it alone. To point at the critical nature of alliances, we called this “Co-Creation.” We had both followed IBM’s success in the early days of computing and saw it hit a crisis in flexibility when the PC was introduced. It’s internal proprietary orientation needed to give way to a larger eco-system orientation and partnering. After many years of thrashing, it has succeeded in taking this jump.

Following collaboration, I believed that there needed to be room for thinking about “transformational” kinds of organizations, that are not at all defined by form or reporting relationships, but by a shared awareness and intention.

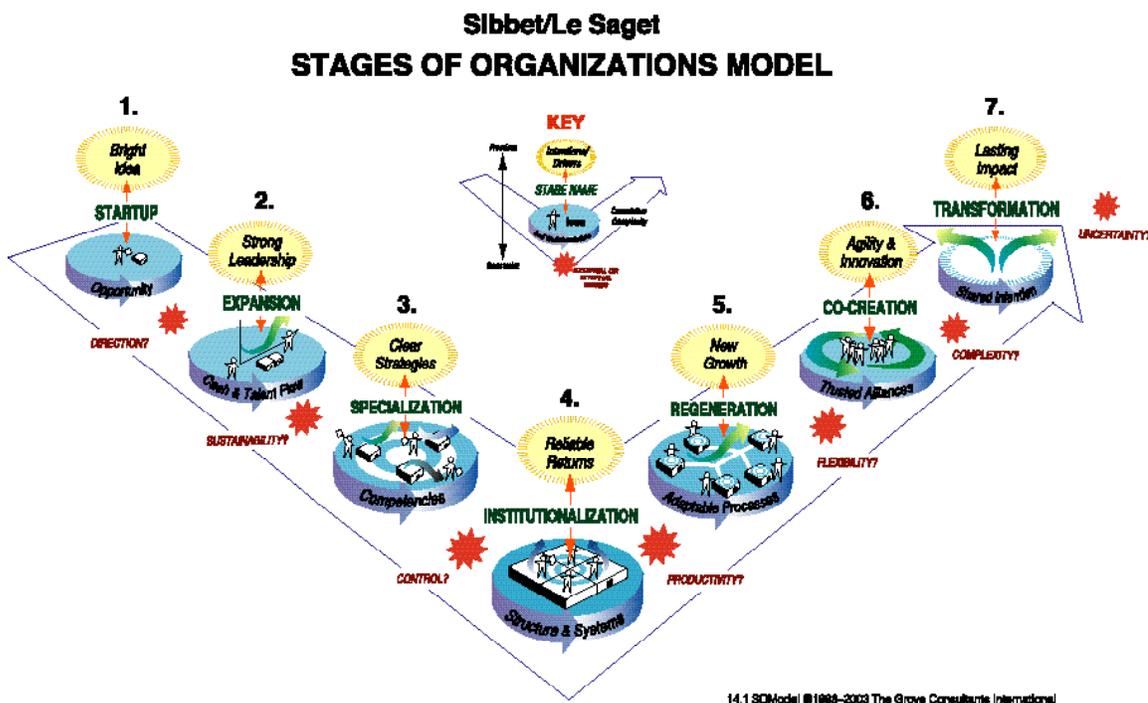
### **Testing the Model**

The fruit of this early, somewhat revolutionary, thinking has been the more orderly evolution of terms and descriptors, and testing the model in the field.

In this regard I began a ten-year conversation with my colleague in Paris, Meryem Le Saget, a syndicated business author and serious student of management and leadership theory. She became persuaded that Arthur M. Young had indeed discovered an organizing framework that solved many theoretical puzzles about describing organizations. She brought the model to her clients in Europe and began testing it in practice. Clients at IBM and hp Europe responded very positively.

I used the model with my clients to diagnose where their various divisions and groups were in their stages of evolution, and what kinds of interventions would be appropriate. I found a deep resonance with the seven archetypes of organization that Mintzberg defined in *Mintzberg on Management*. We refined the names for the crises, and explored the value sets that go with each phase.

The result is the full model shown here, now in its 14<sup>th</sup> iteration.



This article does not allow for a complete exploration of all the phases, which we now understand as archetypes for sustainability. Each is viable, but with different requirements. The simpler nest into the more complex, such that the forms on the right are really eco-systems composed of the more fundamental forms on the left. We've pushed out and defined value sets that go with each phase, and identified some of the types of crises that can destabilize things.

We also took a lot of time to develop small graphics that suggested the type of structures that might typify each archetypal stage, even though structure is not the determinate.

### **Hopeful Aspects of this Process Paradigm**

Our hope is that this model begins to provide a language for talking about some of the most important challenges in our times.

- The SOO Model invites us to understand that the more evolved stages of organizational life are achievable by the elimination of mass and mastering of methodology rather than continuous expansion (good news for the planet).
- It invites us to see that the more basic organizational forms are fundamental to the more advanced, and arguably more important in many ways. This has led us to ask how the institutional elements in an organization can be maintained with quality, and respected as the essential platform for more complex elements.
- It invites us into an eco-systems oriented both/and view of evolution and crisis, and types of organizations rather than an either/or perspective, incorporating the mechanistic perspective in those areas where it is appropriate.
- It invites us to understand that coherence and predictability are not the same, and that coherence can be the result of mutual alignment around a core structural tension seeking resolution, and not necessarily require structural rigidity.
- It invites us to explore what kinds of leadership and values attend the different phases of organizational growth and development, and to understand that as much as we revere them at any particular time, they need to adapt to new stages and challenges in order to grow.

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- This way of thinking, supported by the many other thinkers who have described the interaction between evolution and revolution, should lead us to see chaos and crises as a portal to a new level of organization.

For a more complete exploration of this model, check the Grove's website at

[http://www.grove.com/about/model\\_sustainorgan.html](http://www.grove.com/about/model_sustainorgan.html)

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**David Sibbet** is an organizational consultant and communications designer who, for 25 years, has been helping people work together by opening their ability to communicate in groups, learn from experience, and imagine their futures. David is founder and President of the Grove Consultants International, a full service organizational development consulting firm located in the Thoreau Center for Sustainability in the Presidio of San Francisco. David holds a Masters Degree in Journalism from Northwestern University and a BA in English from Occidental College. For eight years in the 1970's he was Executive Director and Director of Training for the Coro Foundation, a leadership development institute known for its pioneering work in experience-based education. He began his own organizational consulting firm in 1977. In addition to his own work, David is a long-time affiliate with the Institute for the Future in Menlo Park and member of the Global Business Network in Emeryville, CA.



