The Sky's the Limit:
Organizational Musings from the Kite Flyer

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Using the analogy of kites and kite flying, the author muses about how to free organizations from many of the mundane and prescriptive aspects which encumber them. The kite represents, in somewhat whimsical fashion, our educational organizations; the kite flyer becomes associated with the organization's leaders. The analogy permits the author to play with some notions concerning organization, leadership, ambiguity, and paradox which may facilitate a fresh examination of organizational effectiveness. A holistic approach which combines reality and fantasy, powerful external factors with profound internal insights, is advocated in this paper.

En utilisant l'analogie du cerf-volant, l'auteur de cet article se demande comment les organisations pourraient se libérer de tout ce qui est encombrant. Le cerf-volant représente, d'une manière toute fataisiste, nos organisations éducationnelles, et celui qui fait fonctionner le cerf-volant représente les leaders des organisations. L'analogie permet à l'auteur de s'amuser avec des concepts qui ont trait aux organisations, au leadership, à l'ambiguité et au paradoxe. C'est cela qui peut permettre un regard nouveau sur l'efficacité des organisations. Une approche holistique, qui tient compte de la réalité et de la fantaisie, des puissants facteurs externes versus un sens profond de l'insight est alors proposée dans cet article.

> *Young boy*
> *With your kite down the wind*
> *Dipping and twisting as the breeze*
> *Plays with it, sending it up and up*
> *Into the sun, then as suddenly*
> *Pitching earthward, almost*
> *Touching the ground, then dashing it up again,*
>   Raymond Souster*

The image of the kite, brilliant, glorious, soaring and dancing in the afternoon sun evokes, even for those no longer young, vivid stirrings of excitement. In

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*Subsequent italicized lines without specific identification are drawn from this same poem.

Somerset Maugham's (1929) story, "The Kite," the hero's passion was so strong that he, Herbert Sunbury, left his wife and subsequently opted to rot in prison rather than pay alimony to the one who had broken his favorite prize-winning kite. Although few people would go to such extremes, the kite, perhaps better than any single object, may well reflect the dreams and frustrations, the tensions and triumphs of those involved in organizational life. Indeed, it may well represent organizational life itself.

Pelham (1976) attributes the strange fascination of the kite, at least in part, to "the paradoxical quality of providing exercise *and* relaxation to both mind and body." It thus becomes an expression of "man's need to extend his physical and mental reach" (p. 7). In organizations as well as in life, the same basic needs may be identified. Indeed, it is unfortunate that for so long so much research and writing in the area of organizational and administrative theory has focused on the physical — the mundane, the measurable, and the prescriptive nature of organizations. In recent years, of course, alternate perspectives have appeared. Yet, it is time to fly some kites, to implement what March (1976) called the "technology of foolishness": "Playfulness allows experimentation. At the same time, it acknowledges reason. . . . Play [is] an instrument of intelligence, not a substitute" (p. 77).

> *Watch well how your kite*
> *Flies on this bright afternoon in the park*

As we watch, we shall be able to contemplate the purpose, principles, and techniques of kite flying. We shall launch our kites, abandon ourselves to the air currents, and dream dreams of our organizational kite soaring with grace and freedom as it was designed to do. We might follow Kets DeVries's (1980) suggestion that

> a major educational effort might be needed to renew the manager's acquaintance with the unusual and, in a conventional sense, the unacceptable. . . . This reorientation might turn into a journey into the self. . . . Such a search might also lead to the realization of the limitations of rationality in organizational life, the relationship between reality and fantasy in individual and organizational life. (p. 3)

Organization on a String: Structure and Purpose

Obviously there is little, if any, intrinsic value in a few bamboo sticks, a scrap of colored cloth, an assortment of grommets, and some string. And yet the tales and legends, the historical anecdotes, and the scientific experiments are so intriguing that one suspects some real substance behind the activity of kite flying.

The history of tethered flight seems to have begun 30 centuries ago. Legends can be found in folklore and in religion, as well as in Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Kites have been used for both military and civilian purposes, for religious and social rituals, and as symbols of good luck and soaring aspirations. Scientists and politicians alike have capitalized on the kite's versatility. Indeed, there are as many purposes for kite flying as there are fascinating stories and legends. Yet, it is important not to lose sight of one final attribute: Kite flying is fun.

Strangers, observing us furtively from a distance, would be surprised at the care and planning involved in the construction of our kite. They do not recognize that each kite is carefully designed and crafted with a specific purpose in mind. Should the frame be built of wood, of polyethylene tubing, of aluminum, or of something else? Does it even need a frame? What material should be used for the kite cover? Paper? Fabric? What kind? Will it need a tail? How long and, again, of what material? Will it be both decorative and functional? What kinds of knots must be used? How strong must the string be? And what are the relationships among the parts? The form and structure of our kite have been carefully selected to meet the purposes and conditions of today's flight. We will launch a hexagonal three-spar kite, patterned in gold, crimson, and aqua stripes with streamer tails trailing lazily across the sky, drifting in the gentle breeze.

Rogallo, scientist and chief of a giant wind tunnel at NACA[1] (which later became NASA), planned his kite differently. He unrolled three square feet of plastic with this explanation:

> No sticks. I got tired of placing rigid kites into the wind tunnels to test the turbulence. The kites would smash against the side of the wind tunnels. Now when the kite hits the side of the tunnel it just reshapes itself. (Yolen, 1976, p. 17)

What a wonderful lesson for organizations! Instead of continually trying to make an inappropriate design fit an impossible situation, reshape it, change it until it may not even resemble the original organization. But it will work; it may even fly!

Far too much effort has been expended trying to squeeze organizations through prescription, regulation, restructuring, or rearrangement into one of many paradigms of administration. Sander and Wiggins (1985) describe four: (a) administration for efficiency in the mould of Taylor or Fayol; (b) administration for effectiveness à la Barnard or Drucker; (c) administration for responsiveness according to Weick or Salancik; and (d) administration for relevance as conceived by Wittman (pp. 101-104). A proper balance and combination of all four might be most desirable, determined according to the primary purpose of the specific organization.

It has been said that "only a miracle can give a kite balance in the air if it is unbalanced in construction" (Brummitt, 1971, p. 88). Only a miracle (or an exceptionally skilled flyer) can make an unbalanced organization perform

satisfactorily. One cannot fly a kite except at an angle to the wind. It cannot be flown directly into the wind, nor directly with the wind. It must react to atmospheric whims and subtle changes as it sails over different landscapes, responding to billowing ground swells, sudden updrafts, or swirling higher currents in turn. An organization, too, needs to set its own course, conscious of the winds of change, buffeted but not controlled by them.

If a kite is truly responsive — constructed by those who have chosen the materials carefully and have designed it for a purpose — and if it is flown by one who is flexible, adaptable, and skillful — prepared to meet every eventuality — there is sheer beauty, incomparable freedom, and unsurpassed joy in the interaction of flier and kite. Likewise, there is strength in the interaction between human participants and a flexible yet purposeful organization.

Launching a Dream

> *Up to the sky in passion, in the great happiness,*
> *And the next air-pocket, the fall to earth*
> *Or almost earth, but the both of them are hell.*

Many people have attempted the foolhardy task of trying to develop lists of specific rules or characteristics which may assist the leader of an organization. Just as one would not presume to be able to control the wind and air currents, one cannot, with any more certainty, control all the variables of an organization or the characteristics of its leaders. One can attempt to understand the general principles, to develop some guidelines, and to adopt an appropriate modus operandi.

The paradox of kite flying, the rapid transition from ecstacy to panic, from happiness to despair, encompasses one of the most important organizational principles. Nothing is totally stable or predictable; therefore, unless one is prepared to accept change and ambiguity, one cannot be an effective leader. It has been suggested (Douglas, 1986) that "at some point there is an end to possible rearrangements of patterns involving persons" (p. 65). Although Douglas seems to be suggesting that there is a limit to rearrangements which may give any save marginal benefit for an organization, it is interesting to speculate on the amount of time spent in simply rearranging and reorganizing personnel relationships or organizational components. Many organizational theorists spend a great deal of time pondering the patterns involving persons within organizations and advocating specific styles of leadership, or management, or particular types of interpersonal relationships which attempt to identify and meet all of the needs of all of the people involved in the life of a particular organization. But one is forced to ask whether any of us has stopped to consider the impossible nature of this task.

If an organization had 12 members, each one interacting with each other once during the day, there would be a total of 66 simple and individual interactions.

But if an administrator were to attempt to consider all of the possible interaction patterns involving all 12 employees, the number would be staggering. The result is 12 factorial, 4.79×10^8, or 479,000,000 possible patterns of interactions, each with a different dynamic, each affecting the organization in a different way. A general principle may be of some use. Rules which must be chosen and followed according to the dictates of a given, specific situation are of little assistance.

Kets DeVries (1980) speaks of the need for the manager to create a "symbolic integration of what originates inside the person and what is caused by the reality of the external situation" (p. 43). He seems to suggest that one way to accomplish this "symbolic integration" is through a new pattern of management which attempts to manage, not *through* ambiguity, not *by* or *of* ambiguity, but *for* ambiguity (p. 55). In the same way, we fly our hexagonal, three sparred kite — adjusting for ever changing atmospheric conditions but revelling in the challenge and responding to it. Just as a kite cannot fly in a vacuum, neither can an organization exist without paying attention to the myriad of forces attempting to exert pressure on it.

In terms of kite flying, Brummitt (1971) says that "everyone is an inventor or an innovator, despite the fact that someone else may have done the same thing" (p. 14). The leadership principle is sound. One must constantly be inventing, reacting, reflecting on what is happening; it is always possible that what has not worked once will work this time, that what worked before will not work again. One must always be an inventor although this does not imply the necessity to attempt constantly to "come up with" a new theory or approach. Adaptation or responsiveness to the environmental conditions, to the form and structure of the kite at any particular moment, and to the needs or concerns of the one who holds the strings is always a creative and innovative act.

Tichy and Devanna (1986) describe the vision necessary for successful organizational leadership as we could describe kite flying: the result of combining "intuitive right-brain thinking and left-brain analysis" (p. 131). The analysis must be thorough: The type of material, the force of the wind, the weight of the cord, the type of reel, the place of connection all must be well conceived and integrated. Then one must intuitively react to the tug of the kite, the force of the wind, and the movement of the tail. "By visioning the idea, you can get most of it" (Tichy & Devanna, p. 142). Close your eyes; grab hold of the vision of your kite, now drifting, now swirling, now performing intricate acrobatic manoeuvres (the clover, the whirling dervish, the paper clip, the snow man), now skimming the surface of the ocean beside an endless vista of shimmering golden sand. You are free, your kite is free, limited only by your pull on the cord, limited only by the knowledge and the vision of the flyer.

This conception of leadership may seem to some to be naive, to others terrifying. Yet another principle of kite flying comes into play. One does not

control a kite by top-down direction. Leadership of the organization then, becomes a bottom-up affair. Some would say (Ogawa & Bossert, 1989; Morgan, 1986) that leadership may become a quality of the organization itself. Each member becomes responsible for flying a particular kite. Each member combines his left brain analytic knowledge with his own brand of intuition for a specific purpose and becomes a flyer. This perspective is marvelous. All parts of the organization — box kites, kites in tandem, articulated kites, dragon kites, serpents, sleds, parafoils — dance and intertwine to fill the sky with color, excitement, pattern, and purpose. Smiles are contagious, laughter provides the background music — until the double spined bird is dashed to the ground.

There is no single explanation for the accident, no one to scapegoat, no flaw in the fabric to pinpoint for the failure. Indeed, there is never a single cause, but an unfortunate and frequently unpredictable chain of reactions. Yet, perhaps, a lesson may be learned. Knowledge, skill, creativity, flexibility, structural excellence, adaptive qualities, good reflexes, right motivations, or proper responses will not prevent accidents. But one need not focus unduly on the single failure. The other kites are still flying: higher . . . faster . . . and the festival is still in progress.

The Myth of Control

Is there a basic conceptual force behind kite flying? How does one move from carrying one's kite under the arm into an open field to the ecstacy of flight? Plato's Meno might have asked of Socrates, "Can you tell me whether [kite flying] can be taught or is acquired by practice, not teaching; or if neither by practice nor by learning, whether it comes to men by nature or in some other way?" (Frankena, 1965, p. 5).

There are, indeed, some aspects which can be taught, some basic concepts which need to be grasped by one who wishes to succeed in the sport of kite flying. Yet, there is always the balance previously discussed between intuitive or nonrational elements and the scientific and technical aspects of the sport.

The fundamental concepts, however, must be thoroughly understood. Although the kite's surface may come in different shapes, colors, and materials, carefully chosen for their appropriateness, effectiveness, or efficiency in a given situation, its role is to gain lift from the wind. The line or tether secures the kite. It provides a variable control, and yet defines the limits of its flying. The bridle, the line to which the flying line of the kite attaches, determines the kite's correct flight attitude or angle of attack. This is probably the most sensitive and important aspect to be understood. The bridle determines directional stability and must be adjusted for different wind conditions. It is, in a sense, similar to the point at which interaction takes place between a leader and an organization. Thus, it is this linkage point, the intersection of the different components of the

kite, which is the most important, the most sensitive, and which requires the most constant care and adjustment.

Once again, it is important to stress that different styles of kites have different types of components which respond in diverse ways and which have particular strengths and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages. Constant adjustment of these components in response to changing conditions is a dramatic, visible example of the currently popular techniques of "reflection-in-action" or "knowledge-in-use" (Schön, 1983).

It becomes evident to a neophyte, now drawn close and wishing to try the controls, that there is constant tension on the line connecting the flyer to the kite. Yet, even the untutored eye can tell that this tension is desirable, in fact, necessary. Although administrators of many organizations seem fearful of tension, certain that it is indicative of dangerous stress or counter-productive conflict, the kite flyer can reassure us of the positive value of tension. In fact, Tichy and Devanna (1986) identify four paradoxes which they assert may create positive dramatic tensions within an organization (pp. 27-28).

The first tension they discuss is the struggle between the forces of *stability* and the forces of *change*. This is precisely the balance, constantly requiring adjustment and response, which the proficient kite flyer seems to achieve in effortless fashion. Yet, let our curious visitor now take hold of the hand-reels and the second tension is clearly evident: the *denial* and *acceptance* of reality. It looks so deceptively simple when you are watching, head back, eyes following the delicate soaring and strategic manoeuvering of the kite; yet the reality is different. Taking the cord in hand, the neophyte can no longer deny the skill required. Kite flying really is much more difficult than it appeared to be. It is important for leaders to be able to admit their proficiencies and also, where applicable, to admit that they must rely on the expertise of others, however simple the task may seem on the surface. The struggle between Tichy and Devanna's (1986) third tension, *fear* and *hope*, has already been developed by the poet. No success is permanent. No person or organization may rely on past performance or previous experience, for truth is constantly being recreated through the variants of each situation. Finally, Tichy and Devanna describe the conflict between *manager* and *leader*. The kite cannot be managed. It may be coaxed, urged, caressed. It may be adjusted or admired. It does indeed need a flyer who is a true "leader," one who allows the external and the internal forces to merge in "symbolic integration" so that the vision may be grasped.

Thus, it is the concept of paradox, of tension, which provides the true conceptual force behind kite flying. It is the balance between loose and tight coupling which is also evident in successful and adaptive organizations. It is the exquisite feeling of unity between flyer and kite, as one string is slackened while the other is pulled taut. Each line is secure in a constantly changing relationship,

loose and tight, trust and power in harmony, creating the hypnotic attraction of the kite.

Yet, individual leaders must never commit the sin of *hubris*. They must never take their relationship with the environment for granted as did the legendary Daedalus and Icarus or the captain of the *Titanic*. The leader is not omnipotent. Much may indeed be taught, much more may be learned; but there is never the possibility of total control. Ambiguity and unpredictability will never be completely eliminated; they must be tolerated and anticipated. These are key lessons to be learned from the technology of kite flying. Tension may be productive and necessary. Change and stability are not contradictory but complementary. Planning which attempts to predict all eventualities will fail. Many current approaches to theory dealing with leadership or change are both too narrow and inadequate in their singular focus on the political, the technical, or the cultural aspect of an organization to the exclusion of all else.

Striving for the Spectacular

Yolen (1976) suggests that "kite flying is a way that those with artistic souls can temporarily decorate the sky . . . kite flying is a means to tame the power of the wind and convert it to a force that lofts artistic handmade creations towards the clouds" (p. 13). Creative and flexible leaders of an organization can do no less. They can combine the power of the organization with the energy from the environment and raise it to new levels of responsiveness and relevance. Yolen continues, "Kite flying is a key to greater and badly needed human sociability" (p. 14). People of all ages, from different backgrounds and geographic locations, with different dispositions, and with wide variation in their knowledge and education are united in the enjoyment of kite flying. It is not necessary to attempt to orchestrate, or manage, or control the human interactions within an organization. Rather, it is important to share a common vision, to reach for new heights, to tolerate ambiguity and even failure. It is essential

> that the design of organizations should attend to the problem of maintaining both playfulness and reason as aspects of intelligent choice. . . . This is partly a matter of making the individuals within an organization more playful by encouraging the skills and attitudes of inconsistency. It is also a matter of making organizational structure and organizational procedure more playful. (March, 1976, p. 81)

It is to be hoped that a vision of the organization as a kite, flying capriciously, gracefully, erratically, yet powerfully may provoke some new approaches to leadership for responsive and relevant organizations.

> *A kite is a contract of glory*
> *that must be made with the sun,*
> *so you make friends with the field*
> *the river and the wind,*

then you pray the whole cold night before
under the traveling cordless moon,
to make you worthy and lyric and pure.
Leonard Cohen

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1. NACA: National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics
   NASA: National Aeronautics and Space Administation

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