Corporate Culture and Complexity Part 3A: Mistaking the Map for the Territory!
by Marilyn Herasymowych, MCE, and Henry Senko

"We have a need to bring complexity to a level of simplicity — another approach would be to increase our level of thinking to that of complexity."
— Robert Chia, **Complexity, Creativity & Change: Global Challenges for the New Millennium** (The Learning Company Conference Keynote Address, 2000)

In the last four newsletters, we explored the effect of memes in defining the corporate cultures in which we work. In the next few newsletters, we will explore what is required to become aware of the memes operating in your current corporate culture, and, if you wish to create a new culture, what it would take to do that. To begin, the current memes win because of the type of simple thinking that we seem to value today. In many organizations, there is an addiction to speed (see **InfoMine** Vol. 8, No. 2).

Underlying this addiction are the memes of certainty and meme defense (see previous **InfoMine**), which support anything that takes less time, such as simple thinking, and discourage anything that takes more time, such as complex thinking.

In March 2000, we attended **The Learning Company Conference** in Warwick, England. Robert Chia, Professor of Management Learning from the Essex Management Centre at the University of Essex, gave a keynote address. Chia introduced two types of thinking that he described as *simple thinking* and *complex thinking*. He used the metaphor of a water strider to describe simple thinking. Water striders skate on the surface of a lake, using water tension to help them navigate. However, by always staying above the water, they never explore the world found below the surface of the water. Ultimately, the water strider moves from one action to another, blindly unaware of any lurking danger beneath the water. In organizations, you can see that many people act like water striders, quickly moving from one action to another, taking little or no time to reflect on the deeper issues and implications of their actions. In many cases, the results of their actions are fixes that may work for a short time, but inevitably fail in the long term.

Recently we met with an engineer in a company. He observed that people would rather fix something over and over again than to spend

any time really looking at the problem to figure out what was going on. The reason he says that managers and team leaders use to continue to not take time to do it right, is "We have no time!" It seems that some people have no time to do it right, yet they have plenty of time to do it wrong, then fix it over and over again. From this, you can see how merciless the meme for meme defense is. It can convince you how right you are, even when you're dead wrong, and what you're doing is really just plain stupid. Often, meme defense overrides our ability to use common sense.

Why does this happen? Chia's main premise is that humans look at what they assume is their reality, see it as complex, and then attempt to simplify it in order to deal with it. It seems logical to simplify reality, and it seems easy to do. This comes from believing in the certainty meme — that we can know for certain what is happening and what to do about it. When we get caught in the certainty trap, we will simplify our complex reality. We do this because, at a subconscious level, we are convinced that we cannot deal with uncertainty and unpredictability unless we make it certain and predictable. The way to do this is to simplify our complex reality. Then, it's easy to see what is wrong and what to do about it. This happens to us without awareness, and, even if this approach has failed to work in the past, many of us don't seem to want to think about that. We charge on with our *noble certainty*, defending our position, falling prey to meme defense. Chia suggests that this is a futile and flawed approach that

seldom works, and, as complexity increases, it will work less and less.

Chia gives the following examples of simplifying complexity in organizations. Notice how each of these examples demonstrate our need for certainty:

- We use *precision decision making* to deal with ambiguity. We are convinced that the situation is actually not ambiguous, and that we can apply precision techniques, such as **go** and **no go** *decision making* to the situation. And, we want the decisions in record time.
- We use *top-down approaches* to deal with complex business processes and diversity. We do this by telling people what they need to know and do, without involving them in examining processes, and determining what needs to be done. We are convinced that we can control the situation, so we apply control techniques, such as top-down policies and procedures.
- We use *predictability to deal with uncertainty*. We are convinced we know what will happen. We use past information, such as financial reports and trend analyses, to tell us about what the future will be. Then, we act as if this is what *will* happen, not what *might* happen.

Other examples of simplification technologies are:

- Using financial reports to indicate company health
- Using psychometric tests to indicate candidate suitability for jobs
- Using attitude surveys to indicate employee morale
- Using organization charts to indicate authority relationships

None of these simplifying technologies are able to deal with the complexity and uncertainty that are facing most organizations today. It is not that these technologies are worthless; it is that they are used to create an illusion of certainty, even as the world in which they are used changes. Chia uses the term *simple thinking* to describe the type of thinking that underlies these simplifying technologies. He suggests that people in organizations need to move from simple thinking to *complex thinking*. Chia describes simple thinking as mistaking the map for the territory. We look at a map, and assume we know what it will be like to travel from one location to another on this map. In fact, we don't know this at all. All we know is what the map shows us. Until we travel the actual road, we will not know the territory. Chia's point is that, pretending we know, when we can't know, doesn't produce the results that we want.

Chia gives the following examples to demonstrate what he means by complex thinking:

- **From universality to diversity:** Instead of treating everyone and everything the same, assume that everyone and everything is different. This approach validates that people are individuals, which makes them feel valued, and a part of something larger. Once they are validated as who they are, rather than who they are supposed to be, they can let go of their individual needs, and work for the greater good of the team and the organization. You automatically get internal commitment and accountability that people willingly accept. Even more interesting, you automatically get

more effective communication, without having to *train* people on how to communicate.

- **From systems and structures to networks:** Instead of assuming that imposed systems and structures can control behaviour, assume that people work best in a network or collaborative mode, which releases their ideas and perspectives on the systems or structures. When people are invited to work collaboratively to examine and modify the systems and structures, they are more likely to become accountable, and are willing to take responsibility for their thinking and actions. They can create networks that cross organizational boundaries and charts, in order to be more effective.

"We mistake the map for the territory; eat the menu, instead of the dish; allow ourselves to be seduced by our illusions of control; exhibit the phenomena of goal displacement; and mistake representations for reality. … Abstraction and representation is fundamental to life, but it inevitably distorts reality."
— Robert Chia, **Complexity, Creativity & Change: Global Challenges for the New Millennium** (The Learning Company Conference Keynote Address, 2000)