

## LECTURE NOTES

**The Inaugural Tom Gilmore Lecture: Small “L” Leadership, Significant Results. My Journey in Consulting**

**Lecture Date.** November 15, 2016

**Location.** Huntsman Hall, The University of Pennsylvania

**Speaker Name and Background.** Tom Gilmore, CFAR Principal

If you would like more information CFAR’s resources, please contact [cbrundage@cfar.com](mailto:cbrundage@cfar.com).

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**I. Introduction**

**Debbie Bing:** Good evening, I’m Debbie Bing. I’m the President of CFAR, and I have the honor of welcoming you tonight. Old friends, new friends—we’re delighted to see so many of you join us. We have been overwhelmed by the response to this event, though not surprised. We have almost a sold-out house. We know, more than anyone, that the world that treasures Tom Gilmore is vast.

We want to thank Al Barstow of the Penn Organizational Dynamics Program and Ellen Schall, who will be joining us a little bit later on the panel, for hosting us and for partnering with us to do this.

Anyone who has experienced CFAR—and we know that there are many of you in the room that have, in one way or another—knows that we believe deeply that context, history, background, preceding relationships, and discussions bring fuller meaning to any current moment. So, in that spirit, rather than simply introducing Tom and starting off with our lecture, I want to provide a little bit of background on this event and why it has special meaning for us.

Years ago, as some of you know, CFAR’s five founders made a decision to take up the hard work to build an intergenerational firm—versus just owning our jobs. Those of you who have worked with founder-led organizations, know that it’s not easy to do this successfully. Transitions between generations require a cycle of humility, courage, and persistence, on all sides of that boundary. We’ve come to realize that the success of these transitions is built on a hard-won, yet artful, integration of the past and future via the kind of learning partnership that we stand for in our work with others. So, tonight we have the opportunity to enact that with all of you.

This evening’s lecture is the inaugural event of an annual lecture series, named to honor Tom Gilmore and Larry Hirschhorn’s commitment to reflective writing on our work. We at CFAR are grateful and inspired by the body of work that these two colleagues have contributed to the foundation of our work with organizations and to the wider field. And how fitting that we’re meeting here, at the Wharton School, where CFAR got started in

1970 at the then-named Management and Behavioral Science Center, led by Russell Ackoff and Eric Trist.

So, tonight we begin this series with Tom's own journey. All of you that know Tom have had the experience of that familiar voice, quite literally in your ear, encouraging you to translate your work and your ideas into something written. His gentle, but persistent nudge of, "It's 70% of the way there already—why don't you summarize some of the key insights to share with others?" Clients, colleagues, friends, all who have had the pleasure of Tom's collegiality, have also had the pressure of the Tom Gilmore writing conscience: to translate experience or nascent ideas into something that starts to look like knowledge. And, more times than not, that knowledge is co-created with others. So, there's no better way to launch this series, aimed at creating moments of joined learning with our colleagues and collaborators, than with Tom's own reflection on that very topic.

Speaking personally, Tom has been a mentor for me from my early days at CFAR. And Tom, you'll remember this story—in 1999, when we suffered together through a large group event gone wrong, (it does happen): we each independently and unknowingly wrote a reflective piece about that experience for a CFAR retreat on our practice, only to discover we had written about the same moment.

When faced with perplexing moments in our client work, he has encouraged me, time and again, to take the risk of writing a helpfully provocative note to leaders, offering observations about the challenges we were seeing as an invitation for others to engage. He has been a co-author, a provocateur, a muse—and made my work and my family better as a result. And, as this audience knows well, his generosity with this gift seems to know no limits. Even tonight, at times against his better judgment, he has worked tirelessly to prepare not just a lecture—but an experience.

It's been a hard week for this country with Trump's election. The depths of the divides we face have, at times over these last days, for me, made it hard to hold onto our belief that collective impact through organizations, or otherwise, is possible. But I've had the chance to read ahead tonight and know that, even in the face of a moment that challenges our best reflective skills, Tom's provided the fodder for us to rise above and have an experience of collective impact right here in this room by co-creating learning through our time together tonight.

So, in true Tom Gilmore spirit, we're going to ask you not to start by listening—but to start by turning to a neighbor, and, just for a moment, connect with an idea in your work, in your organization—something that's live for you, that connects to our theme of small "L" leadership and share it with the person sitting next to you. Just for a couple minutes.

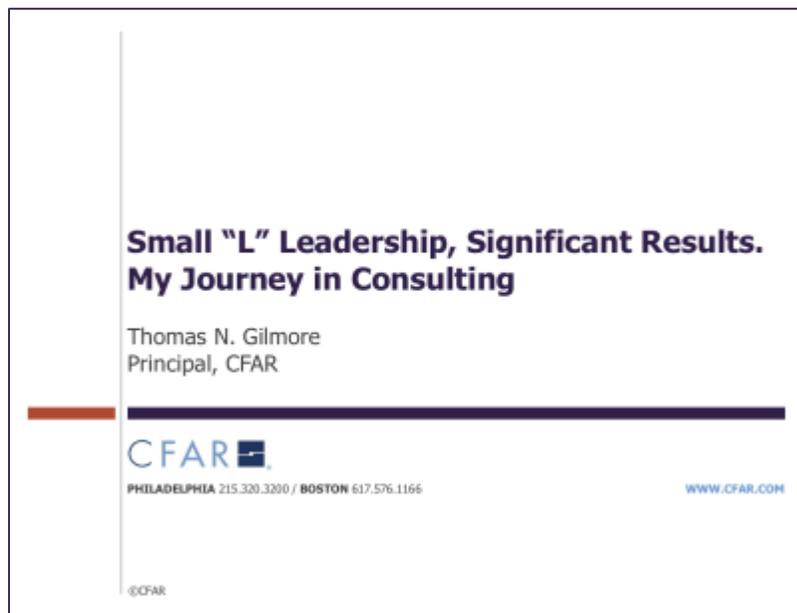
*(Participants briefly talk with one another.)*

Let's come back to a full group. Tom just joked, "Maybe we could just let them do this all evening." We won't let him off the hook. Again, thank you very much for joining us. It's terrific to see everybody, to be surrounded by thoughtful people to engage with these ideas. We really appreciate the community that we have right here, so thank you, and thank you Tom.

*(Tom Gilmore to podium.)*



**Tom Gilmore:** Thank you so much. It's a tribute to Debbie and the firm that they could create such a perfect way to both burden and honor me. It took all of the ethnographic design skills of CFAR's leadership team to think of what would be a fitting way to acknowledge Larry and myself for our writing for wider audiences. I've written a CFAR Briefing Note—you can seek it out if you'd like—on productive pairs. And if ever there was a productive pair and someone I couldn't be more grateful to, it's Larry Hirschhorn—especially for his help in my finding my writing voice. I am already looking forward to his lecture next year.



I'm the son of an academic, and part of my writing challenge was imagining what would my father think if he ever saw anything I wrote. He wouldn't have understood it—he was a Renaissance historian. But Larry was such a mentor and guide and encourager for me to find my writing voice—a gift that has been deeply important to me—and perhaps burdened some of you. Our first collaborative article on our work with Legal Services for the poor was published in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, one of the top journals in our field.

I'm incredibly moved by—and anxious about—being in the presence of so many people with whom I have had such energizing exchanges on such a wide variety of topics. The best of CFAR's writing has either been overtly co-produced by a conversation or an insight that has come from the client's side of the boundary or by us, thinly masking the experience and using you [the client] as a case to illustrate an insight from our collaboration. But it's been a terrific relationship over this long period, with you and others like you, exploring the challenges that our organizations face and extracting insights from so doing.

I want to touch on the following in the 30 minutes we have to hit highlights of my 44 years at CFAR:

- ▶ The origins of small “L” leadership, and particularly the natural entry point of transitions. I had planned on linking to the many transitions in the wake of Hilary’s victory, but alas it was not to be.
- ▶ The power of Weick’s notion of “that’s interesting” that tuned my way of reading *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, the sports pages, etc. in ways that had “interesting” links to organizational challenges. For example, a client’s musing on how are the Bulls going to replace Michael Jordan might offer insights to the challenges dealing effectively with top team transitions.
- ▶ The invention of a genre: “the Briefing Note,” which has been very helpful, I think—not only to me, but also to the firm—in its modesty and focus and as a transition to future writing or development into a new tool.

I will go into greater depth on two of CFAR’s many tools that I have been differentially responsible for developing, stewarding, and curating:

- ▶ “*Histories of the Future*”—A playful and powerful way to create alternative scenarios for an organization.
- ▶ “*Social Architecture*”—The design and inter-relationships among many diverse stakeholders in addressing the challenges facing their institutions. What are the ways in which one can create structures, relationships, groups that can carry conversations that have to be had, in light of the weight of the decisions that have to be made, across thoughtful differences within the group? An example of this is how to change conference panels from four to five mini-lectures into interactive conversations among the members and with the audience.

## **II. My Improbable Journey to Working at the Management and Behavioral Science Center Founded by Ackoff and Trist in the Wharton School**

My undergraduate major was Roman History and Literature, with my thesis about Publius Clodius Pulcher, who dressed up as a woman to get inside the Vestal Virgin’s rites and was an enemy of Cicero’s. My next step was coming to Penn’s architecture school, instead of law school—which I’ve never regretted, even though I never practiced as an architect. The power of design thinking has been essential in exploring the critical internal relationships, the connections to a neighborhood influenced by Jane Jacobs. I began to wonder if I (or anyone) wanted to change any institution—high school, juvenile detention, etc.—would I want to be the top executive or the architect? This was the late 1960s. Architecture and the city planning department were very much into social change. Ian McHarg gave a wonderful course on ecology and the importance of the environment. Russ Ackoff offered his course on systems thinking and operational research in the design school and linked me to Eric Trist when he learned of my interest in corrections to deepen my insights into the impact of buildings on behavior and change. Trist had done work at the Tavistock on prisons in England.

One additional influence during my architectural years was a seminar in criminology by John Conrad, a visiting professor from the U.S. Bureau of Prisons, for whom I wrote a paper on the impact of design on the inmate and staff dynamics.

Through a very odd set of personal connections, it ended up that one of my architectural professors was awarded a grant from the National Institute of Corrections to do a manual—*Planning and Designing for Juvenile Justice*—to develop new thinking about juvenile detention facilities. It was like the Hill-Burton Act for hospitals, but this was for juvenile correctional facilities. This architectural professor and I realized we didn't know enough about the juvenile justice and corrections field, so we reached out to Russ Ackoff and Eric Trist at Wharton to be co-leaders, and relocated the team to the Management and Behavioral Science Center in Vance Hall, with the charge to produce a manual for local jurisdictions to reinvent their systems and settings for juvenile justice offenders.

It was wonderful to work with Russ and Eric, both on the focal project, and often their linking me to two or three relevant background articles—Goffman on total institutions, Trist's work on the resocialization of returning English POW'S from German camps to civilian life—powerful insights, still relevant today, for veterans returning from war.

### III. CFAR's Organizational Genes

They [Trist and Ackoff] did both agree on being very attuned to what's going on in the wider environment—and God knows we all need those skills today—of starting from the outside and really thinking ecologically: what are the web of relationships that are relevant to whatever the focal issue is that we're trying to work on at this particular moment? They both were contextualists.



Eric was very interested in the power of "search conferences" that he and Fred Emery developed at the Tavistock. How do you assemble a group of people, who share a field or domain or community, and get them thinking—beginning with the outside environment via listing trends, events, dynamics, etc. that were happening in the contextual environment that didn't yet cross the boundary of the organization? What is going on in the wider environment that we should pay attention to? This sets the frame within which to think about the imports

and exports (people, ideas, orders, funds flows, etc.) that are crossing the boundary of the organization and represent emergent opportunities or threats. Marv Weisbord and Sandra Janoff powerfully developed these methods in their work on Future Search.

Russ Ackoff, in parallel, developed a very powerful, but less textured process of Idealized Re-design—creating a specific desirable picture of the organization with the only constraint being that the element(s) had to be technologically feasible and, if brought into being, capable of sustaining itself in the external environment. He then challenged the group to make the minimum number of changes from the ideal to make it feasible.

These two processes—Idealized Design and Future Search, informed CFAR’s development of Histories of the Future, drawing on Weick’s finding that we think more vividly and creatively in the past tense, especially with the improv “and” rule of building on each other’s contributions. I will discuss these later.

In many ways, Russ and Eric were not a productive pair—but each were powerful influences on their students. How many people in this room had the experience of listening to Russ or Eric in any kind of forum? Take a look around at who’s got their hands up. I think all of you would agree that those were incredibly powerful moments—but in very, very different ways. Russ had this stance as if to say: “I’ve come to disturb you with powerful ideas.”

I thought about the German Sunday midday meal, at which the whole family was tight as a tick because it was the one time the father ate with the family. There was a way in which coming into contact with Russ, at least for me, made me anxious. Eric was more soft spoken, welcoming, easy to think with—he would take in your ideas and give them back—still with your ownership, but greatly enriched. Eric was also narcoleptic. Several times on doctoral reviews, the candidate would think Eric had fallen asleep, only to have him add the most insightful and helpful idea to the review.

#### **IV. CFAR’s Entry Into Leadership Development, Initially in Corrections**

This work on juvenile justice taking place at the vaunted Wharton School somehow caught the attention of the National Institute of Corrections, who, revering Wharton and its reputation, funded “Strategic Management in Corrections”: an executive education leadership program for 40 correctional executives for two weeks, with a required change project and a final, shorter reflective session. We put in front of them the most incredible faculty—Jay Galbraith talking about organizational design and responsibility charting, Russ Ackoff on Idealized Design, Andy Van de Venn on nominal group technique, Don Schon on ideas in good currency, Marvin Wolfgang on his cohort study of juvenile offenders. This was followed by their Action Learning projects and a final summative week at Wharton. This ran for seven years and greatly developed CFAR’s designs for effective action learning programs, and developed our well-documented, powerful tools for strategy and change.

After the first year, we reallocated the times and created a requirement that had each core participant link a “co-participant” to their project and attend with them one of four shorter regional sessions. We published an article on the impact of this change because of its significant effects in deepening the learning and results from their projects. Equally powerful were the impacts on CFAR, with regard to our development of tools and approaches to effective large group engagements in adapting to critical changes facing organizations. One of our earliest

papers described the transformative power of the “co-participant role” (“Action-Based Modes of Inquiry and the Host-Research Relationship,” *Consultation*, Fall, 1986, pp. 160-176).

The shift in frame from executive development as revenue to a university’s learning, research, and publishing mission has been powerful in subsequent work with foundations, associations, industries, and especially in healthcare. We have deployed the tools and designs with other communities: Wharton hosted a major leadership development session for the National Legal Services Corporation. That, in turn, led to our being invited into Johnson & Johnson’s multi-year initiative to develop at Wharton, via the Executive Education Center and the Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics, a three-week leadership program for nursing executives that culminated in a three-day joint session with the participant’s CEO of the health system, created from the success of the “co-participant” role in the corrections program.

Via our powerful learning in healthcare from the nursing leaders—so often the integrators across all the complexity in healthcare—we were invited to consult to the strategic planning of the Association of American Medical Colleges and subsequently to annual leadership sessions for academic medical center leaders, as well as projects for individual academic medical centers.

Trist and Perlmutter, in the 1970s, offered an Action Learning course at Wharton with the intriguing title “Social Architecture and Organizational Ecology.” I worked with some students at Wharton, and a couple more in the design school, and we chose as our object of study the hell hole called the “youth study center” (there wasn’t much studying going on in there) that occupied the site that is now the Barnes [Foundation]. There is something quite wonderful about the expiation of that site—and the horrors of what went on in that former building—to have such a glorious collection of art now resting in that same location on the [Benjamin Franklin] Parkway.

My experience has been that, each phase or stage (and this particularly came to me as I was going back over old notes) has within it the seeds of the next phase—but often in surprising ways, and often only if one is fully present in the current phase. So, if you’re too eager to get to that next step, it actually inhibits its likelihood to actually happen.

## V. Discovering the Power of Leadership Transitions as an Entry Point for Significant Change

I learned just how powerful and fate-making leadership transitions are when Milt Shapp got elected, and progressive correctional stakeholders advocated for a proven reformer versus our fear that he was probably going to appoint an old-school prison leader from Pittsburgh—which he did.

We were taken with Waddington's notion about these "natural entry points" for change.



If you imagine a ball oscillating gently from one side to the other in a valley that then splits into two valleys, with a major ridge in between, one can see that the tiniest push at the right moment could direct it down one path versus the other. A short time later, to reverse a decision would require considerable energy and capital to switch to the other path.

For example, once a search committee for a university decides on somebody, it is not easily undone—not in a year, not in two years—unless there is something fairly catastrophic. So, it was very intriguing to think about this high leverage moment, what Robert Yin would call a "natural entry point," to be effective and to create some kind of leveraged change.

One of the gifts of the leadership program in corrections, beyond powerful tools, was the gift of the lifelong collegueship of Ellen Schall and John Isaacson, as two members in one of the earlier sessions. These are colleagues (as are others in attendance) that have been unbelievably important to me personally (and to CFAR more broadly) as collaborators, co-authors, and clients over the years. John Isaacson was a significant mentor in our work and in my book, *Making a Leadership Change: How Organizations and Leaders Can Handle Leadership Transitions Successfully* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1988), that built on his key concepts:

- ▶ *Hunger*—The marriage of imagination to ambition, the will to realize it in the world, the gumption to want to make a mark in some kind of way.
- ▶ *Speed*—The capacity to learn quickly because, in any leadership transition, the ratio of what you know when you cross the boundary to all the stuff that’s buried in the organization is huge—and that capacity to learn quickly, to be a quick study, is crucial.
- ▶ *Weight*—Used to capture how people hold their authority, their presence, their connections to key stakeholders. One of the reasons I've gotten so interested in enactments and theater is their power in building leadership presence and attention to how one carries one’s authority.

I had a recent experience where I was with a search committee picking, not the candidate, but which of three search firms to use (and, unfortunately, Isaacson Miller wasn’t one of the three that they were vetting) and I shared with them Kahneman’s belief about group decision-making:

First, when you have a group of people, ask each person to silently jot down their ideas on a well-framed question—before the fastest lips can dominate the group—by just a phrase or two or a judgment or even a facial gesture—about whether they think somebody is fit to be further considered.

Second, compare the candidates to the focal theory of the case—what’s the job about? What are the key issues (and not just to one another, as in a beauty pageant)? This keeps the key strategic issues in the foreground.

Third, drawing on Gary Klein’s recommendation of a pre-mortem, its links to CFAR’s work with “Histories of the Future,” we suggest:

“Exploring with the candidates, but especially with the members of the search committee (and search firm), what would be the ways, if a potential candidate were to fail in the leadership role for this organization, at this stage of your career, what would be a likely failure scenario? This isn’t meant as a kind of thumbs up, thumbs down, Roman gladiator gesture about a particular candidate, but it’s in the service of focusing where the board and others might need to offer support.”

An example comes to mind from of an innovative school in Boston, infused with Dewey’s concepts and funded largely by its founder over its first decades. When he stepped down, the board chair convened a search committee, and they scanned far and wide and selected an extremely talented person from the Harvard Graduate School of Education who had done a study of the innovative British early childhood experiments and they brought him on board. He only lasted one year.

I can't recall how I got a copy of the board chair’s letter to the failed head of school which began with, “What a great third headmaster you would have made.” The board chair then owned how poorly the board had fulfilled its job in supporting the transition. If they’d done anything like a pre-mortem to identify “what are the two or three failure scenarios,” it could have guided work by trustees in supporting this leader.

As positive example, following the selection of a president, their board had different members every Sunday night for the first couple of months hold a dinner for the president, with a

particular set of relevant networks linked to the key issues facing the university. These approaches don't take rocket science. They just take somebody thinking empathically about what might be both the positive or negative dynamics of a particular situation and deploying resources accordingly.

One of my favorite entry stories belongs to a new superintendent of a troubled public school system. The incoming principal realized he needed to be briefed on the budget, on the union contracts, on the concerns of parents—a whole variety of challenges. He held the meeting in the gym—inviting parents, students, the union, teachers, staff, etc. to watch, but not interfere. In a fishbowl, he then engaged the different key staff on the issues of budget, safety, finances, educational philosophy, etc. They would see his concerns, learn with him, and, at the end, could surface relevant reflections. This approach enacted two key principles:

- ▶ “I'm going to have an open administration.”
- ▶ “I'm going to be attentive to all the different constituencies.”

Enacting the desired stance is more powerful than saying it.

The variety of our [CFAR's] staff backgrounds and interests creates opportunities for linking across different experiences. Nancy Drozdow and I wrote a piece together that came out of a CFAR reflective conversation wherein we shared our reactions in very different client settings when we realized that other consultants were also at work in the organization. For example, in family business, you had consultants that were talking about the transfer of assets, you had lawyers looking at estate issues, you had people looking at strategy and the capital needed for what might be new initiatives. In healthcare, each of the tribes and functions in a health system often will have different consultants. I recall, in a hospital dining room, sharing a table with a consultant from another firm and sensing that the COO was anxious that we were comparing notes and perhaps were going to come up with some fancy move—when our focus was how might we better collaborate where it made sense. The article is “Consulting in a Constellation of Advice-Givers” (*Journal of Management Consulting*, Volume 9, No. 4, November 1997).

I value that CFAR works well with prior and concurrent consultants, especially in my area of interest in leadership transitions. The worlds of searching, onboarding, and governance have separate consulting niches, when the issues in play are often highly interdependent (CFAR Briefing Notes: Dilemmas of Aligning Leadership Succession, Strategy, and Governance.)

## VI. The Invention of the Briefing Note as a Mode of Capturing Weick's Notion of "What is Interesting"

Early on, lost in the midst's of my failing memory, I invented the genre of the Briefing Note. I suspect it was reading a colleague's thoughtful framing of a key issue to a potential client, and realizing that, with a few edits of confidential information or specifics for that client, it was a thoughtful framing of some common organizational issue. I also suspect it was a way of writing without the anxiety of sending it to a journal or some arrogant reviewers who'd tell you it was crap. It may have been a defense against what I imagined my father might have thought if he ever read it.

In any case, the Briefing Note format felt freeing and helpful to colleagues. It was a significant shift from in my early career, when I would write incredibly punishing notes to myself.

For example, I remember doing some work with the Corrections Department, and the retreat was meant to go until 3:30 in the afternoon. At lunch, the commissioner said, "I think we can wrap it up right after lunch." And I said, "Yes." In my reflection, I taxed myself with saying: what might have been a better reply? I might have asked him why? Are things not going well? Could I tolerate that? The Briefing Note was a substitute for these punishing reflections that didn't seem to help me or anybody else.

The genre of a Briefing Note was a more constructive way to do what Don Schon so powerfully labeled as "reflective practice." As they [the Briefing Notes] developed, it was a powerful way to pull for thinking across different engagements around common issues as well as across CFAR colleagues. Furthermore, they [Briefing Notes] are often the early beginning of ideas that later get developed into a publishable article or a structured tool for colleagues to use. And there's an awful lot of them these days—over 200—and part of my glide path out is to weed, curate, and tighten them up a little bit to increase their accessibility to colleagues and clients.

Many of them come from reading and newspapers. For example, I was struck in reading *The Perfect Storm* with the concept of the rescue swimmer. Sally and I, in the summer, spend time on Cape Cod near the Coast Guard station from which the Coast Guard boat deploys to connect with distressed boats on the ocean side of the Cape. The book linked to a Coast Guard study of hundreds of these rescues that found that they often got very expensive assets over a distress situation—but could only watch, because nobody on the boat was strong enough to even put anybody into the seat lowered by the hovering chopper. So, they invented the rescue swimmer who jumps into the water, gets on the boat, and often was able to resolve the situation (e.g., get the engine started again)—offsetting the anxiety that was interfering with the people taking care of themselves. It struck me that there are many organizations in which we, as consultants, by analogy, stay up in the helicopter observing/diagnosing their dissolution—versus taking the risk to get inside in a deeper, more helpful way to join and amplify the positive features within the group in distress. It invites the risk of "over-functioning," but can also be a form of Action Learning and teaching that leaves behind greater competence.

I also love odd things that, to me, capture something interesting in our field of consulting and have stickiness. There's a wonderful story about Milton Erickson, a hypnotic therapist: just out of college, he's in the South, and he's trying to sell books. He goes to a hog farm and approaches the farmer and says, "I'd like to sell you some books." The farmer replies, "We have no need for your books." Erickson asks, "Do you mind if I just hang around while you feed the

hogs?" The farmer replies, "No, stay all you want, but I'm not going to buy the books." So, the farmer is feeding the hogs, and Erickson swears, out of his own awareness, he bends down and picks up a shingle next to the pen and he starts to scratch the hog. And the farmer looks at him and says, "Boy, you sure know how to scratch a hog the way a hog likes to be scratched! Why don't you stay for dinner?" He stayed for dinner and the farmer actually bought a couple books. (Erickson, Milton H., and Sidney Rosen. *My Voice Will Go With You: The Teaching Tales of Milton H. Erickson, M.D.* New York: Norton, 1982: pp. 59).

So many of our encounters trigger some unconscious connection where you suddenly feel open to somebody or feel closed or whatever. By capturing these hunches, we enrich how much we think about what is the way we join? What is the way we distance ourselves? What is the way we give effective feedback, etc.?

At CFAR, we are intrigued with after-thoughts. The French have this great phrase, "l'esprit d'escalier" (staircase wit), which notes that you often have your best thoughts after you've just walked out of the eviscerating exam or difficult sales pitch. A version of this is the this "one-minute essay" at the end of a lecture asking: what are the two to three big ideas you're taking away? (And, when tabulated, informs the professor what the students thought were the key points and ideas.)

We adapted this at a prestigious medical school in a lovely conference room that had these grizzled portraits all around. A staff group was reporting to the top leaders on financial budget cuts needed to meet the federal allowance for how high your overhead rate could be. The group had done its work and presented to four top leaders. After the presentation and some mild feedback, which aimed to inform the next stage, as the top leaders all got up to leave, I noted, "You know, this is an institution where you four leaders are talked about, much more often than you're talked to directly."

I want you to imagine you've left the meeting: pull your chairs back and have the staff working group share and pool what they heard, what they took away, what will be the implications for their follow-up work. Stunningly, the staff group was much more candid, to the point where, as the designer, I worried that I'd put some people in jeopardy by creating a "pseudo-safety"—but the frame helped align the expectations across the staff and top leaders.

## VII. Some Briefing Notes Linked to Transitions

Not surprisingly, many Briefing Notes have to do with taking a new role, checking it out, often based on innovations from our clients.

For example, a new leader, a good friend, took over as welfare secretary in a state. Instead of setting the agenda for the hour-long briefing—e.g., outstanding litigation, table of organization, your assessment of your talent, budget, etc.—he said to each of the subordinates, “You have an hour on my calendar. What is most important for your unit and the wider department?”

He said he learned four times more from how they coped with the anxiety of being on the hook to design and then enact their strategy than if he had structured the agenda. Certainly, all of us who are consultants have had that experience with an RFP that is so over-specified that all the submissions are going to look the same.

Other Briefing Notes in this category are listed below:

- ▶ Checking Out a New Possible Job
- ▶ Dilemmas of Aligning Leadership Succession, Strategy and Governance
- ▶ Entering a Role Via External Stakeholder Perspectives
- ▶ Following a Founder
- ▶ Managing the Crush on Becoming a University President
- ▶ Preparing for a Briefing Meeting with a New Leader
- ▶ Small “L” Leadership Actions, Small “L” Transition Skills
- ▶ Typical Patterns in Top Teams: How This Group Gets Stuck

Many are an early version of a structured tool or framework—such as productive pairs, decision rights, or the “boundaries” framework.

### VIII. Briefing Notes: Transitions and Identity Shifts

I'm particularly interested in identity shifts, and found a powerful story from the world of sports. When Alex Rodriguez moved to the Yankees, he had to move from shortstop to third base. The sports media asked Ripken, who had made a similar switch with the Baltimore Orioles, about this. Ripken said:

"I trained myself for 15 years as a shortstop. You can't let that go as easily as you might think. Once you start getting into playing and start experiencing live action... probably three-quarters of the way through my first year, I started to feel like a third baseman... I would recommend to Alex that you're a third baseman now, that's your identity, that's who you are. At third, if you don't develop the mentality to be more of a goalie, to be aggressive once the ball comes at you and to be willing to give up your body to block the ball, you won't be a good third baseman."

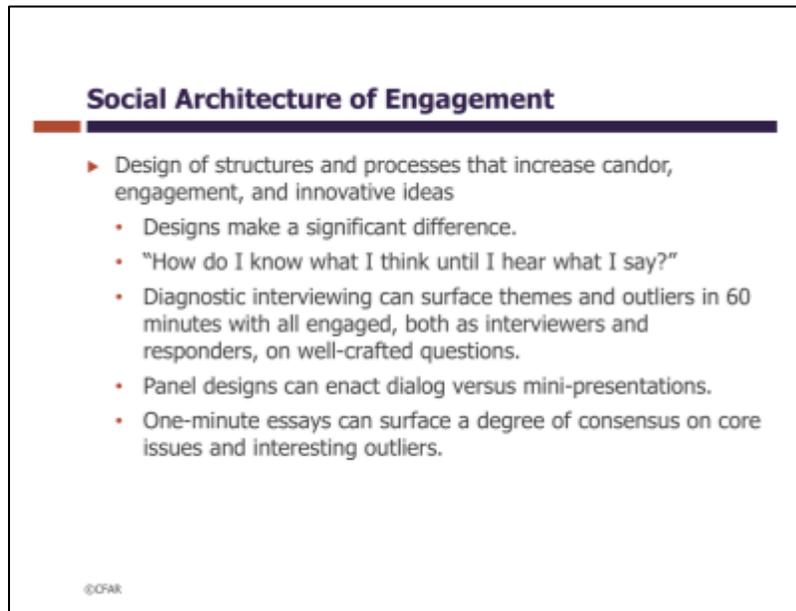
In CFAR's extensive work with leadership transitions in higher education and healthcare, many transitions—such as chairs of medicine becoming deans, researchers becoming the director of research institute, etc.—they and others under-tend to the identity shifts involved. They fall prey to what Trist called "ordinariness as a denial mechanism," that imagines you can walk across the hall, put the right sign on the door, and you're off to the races.

So, here Ripken is saying it's going to take him 100 games to get comfortable, and he ends up with this insight that it isn't just about the fragmented cluster of skills—it's an *identity shift*. Our ethnographically trained colleagues have summarized the frame shift in internal versus external promotions succinctly: "Internal candidates need to make the familiar strange, whereas external need to make the strange familiar."

In closing, I want to discuss two contributions to CFAR's considerable set of powerful tools and methods that, with hindsight, I see were each deeply shaped by my graduate degree in architecture.

## IX. Two CFAR Tools

### Tool: The Social Architecture of Engagement<sup>1</sup>



**Social Architecture of Engagement**

- ▶ Design of structures and processes that increase candor, engagement, and innovative ideas
  - Designs make a significant difference.
  - “How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?”
  - Diagnostic interviewing can surface themes and outliers in 60 minutes with all engaged, both as interviewers and responders, on well-crafted questions.
  - Panel designs can enact dialog versus mini-presentations.
  - One-minute essays can surface a degree of consensus on core issues and interesting outliers.

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Social structures have different *carrying capacities* for different kinds of conversations: pairs differ from trios; sequences make significant differences; large groups have different dynamics from small groups. Frames matter, as illustrated by recent research that showed significant, longer-term performance differences of new hires between an orientation that was “breaking them in” versus “tapping their best.”

In work on a corporate review process with a dominating CEO, having the sector executives each frame the issues facing their assigned lines of business (before the line of business heads engaged the discussion) created significantly more exchanges across levels of hierarchy. Inviting each individual to collect their thoughts on a well-framed issue greatly improves group decision-making. CFAR believes in the maxim: “How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?” Diagnostic Interviewing can engage pairs in rapidly developing major themes, challenges, and ideas. Panel designs can be interactive (versus four to five mini-presentations) if facilitated by a strong leader who sets the frame as a conversation.

CFAR has developed a rich set of tools, writings, and processes for large group rapid design. Debbie Bing and I wrote a chapter about an amazing experience with Nick Scoppetta, the leader of the child welfare system in New York City. He was stepping away after taking over in a crisis and wanted to engage key stakeholders (about 550 participants) in looking back and looking ahead. Key is: solid advance work, creative modes of engagement, and thoughtful links back to the participating organizations for accountable follow-through. In a vast ballroom were 15 tables, each with a mix of stakeholders—foster parents, birth parents, frontline staff, agency leaders, system senior leaders, nonprofit advocates—in essence, a microcosm of the system. On

<sup>1</sup> For further information of CFAR’s work in the social architecture of engagement, see Tom and Debbie Bing’s article: “Tools for Effective Transitions Using Large Group Processes,” in *The Handbook of Large Group Methods: Creating Systemic Change in Organizations and Communities*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006.

the dais, the commissioner sat with the litigator (who was suing the system), top division heads, the state child welfare leader, and the head of a major foundation supporting the change efforts. It was essentially a microcosm of the key roles in the organization, and mirrored the strategic intent to be more neighborhood-based and to work across the different identities.

We need to creatively build these processes for rapid design, getting people's thinking and, more importantly, connecting creative ideas and changes back to the organization—beginning with the pre-session orientation, joining with others, diverging to pull in creative ideas, converging to commit to next steps, and signing up to be accountable.

## Tool: Histories of the Future

### Histories of the Future

- ▶ Weick observes that people think more concretely and creatively in the past tense.
- ▶ This scenario method in an hour and a half can create collective "histories" from groups of 10-200 via the following steps:
  - Looking back from a date that has personal meaning (e.g., wedding anniversary, last child off to college, etc.) each participant creates a short narrative about a change journey **in the past tense** of key challenges, innovative approaches, and surprising allies to overcome them.
    - ▶ Some are given panel roles with the requirement that their responses must be in the past tense, with the **improv "and" rule** to build on one another's contributions.
    - ▶ Others ask tough questions (or are observers).
    - ▶ At the end, all participants vote as to its plausibility and harvest key insights as to stakeholders, tactics, and implications for next steps.

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A lovely example of a small point leading to a significant creative process comes from a "small observation" from Karl Weick. Based on an experiment with his college students (the Norway white rats of social sciences), he demonstrated that requested narratives about an event that *will* happen are significantly less rich than when the request is for an event that *has* [already] happened. Just that simple shift in tense creates more complex and creative narratives.

CFAR built on this insight to create Histories of the Future. We begin this process by having people locate themselves in the future—not simply by five or 10 years hence, but by a significant, personal event at the set future date. These put people into a future context that is personal, not abstract. Vivid Histories of the Future enable people to construct rich narratives: to look at imagined actions, mistakes, successes, moves and countermoves, threats, and opportunities in the wider environment—and then step back and connect up current choice points to act into these possible futures.

## X. Similarities Between Improv and Leadership

- ▶ Some initial sense of where you are going, but not overly elaborated or specific
- ▶ A team as a key feature with a fluidity of lead and follow dynamics
- ▶ The criticality of collaboration over competition
- ▶ The simultaneity of the planning and execution
- ▶ Felt risk in the moment—real stakes
- ▶ An active, engaged audience that has open exchange with the team

The playwright David Ives' reflection on theater captures the importance of these processes:

"I think of theater as an arena for communal empathy. To write for the theater, you have to have a kind of imaginative empathy for people in order to understand how and what they feel. You then bring that to an audience. The audience has to empathize with what you're saying, and the actors have to empathize with what you've written, and all the people who put on a production together have to empathize with each other for the space of four to eight weeks. I think of theater as this giant civilizing arena where people find a common ground. It's where, in one way or another, we realize that we're in the same leaky boat, and we realize it in person."

## XI. Conclusion

### My gratitude to CFAR as my professional home

- ▶ I have been privileged to be part of CFAR over these 44 years as a thriving "home" that meets the poet Frank Bidart's description:  
*"The greatest luxury is to live a life in which **the work** that one does to earn a living, and what one has the **appetite to make**, coincide, by a kind of grace are the same, one.*
- ▶ CFAR hired Analysts who worked part-time when they were students at Wharton and some continued post their graduation—300 to 400 over these 44 years. One alumna of this experience recently wrote:  
*"Its not often that one thinks of a former employer as an 'alma mater' but I find I have the same sense of loyalty and love for CFAR as I do for Swarthmore and Wharton—all places that **shaped how I think and who I am in the world.***

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Debbie began this evening noting the uncertainties we are facing with the presidential transition. It has been for me a great pleasure to see so many people, that I care so much about, and how much of you is in us at CFAR as we all face the future with an ever-greater need to live by novelist's E. M. Forster's injunction: "Only connect." Thank you.