

# **TO FLICKER OR SWING: THE FIRE AND PENDULUM OF LEADERSHIP**

**William Bergquist and Agnes Mura**

Our memory of mechanistic organization of the Twentieth Century is that the organization ran like a pendulum. A pendulum epitomizes elegance and simplicity in motion. We can disrupt the course of the pendulum by giving it an added push or by bumping into it and slowing it down. In either case, the pendulum will adjust its course and continue swinging back and forth at a greater or lesser magnitude. The pendulum, in modern systems theory terms, will always return to a balance, retaining its basic form or pathway. Systems theorists suggest that organizations tend to return to their previous form and function even with disruptions and interference. While today's organizations may seem to be chaotic and in disarray, we may merely be witnessing a long term process of homeostatic readjustment and an ultimate return to a former state or style of pendulum functioning.

Is this mechanistic analogy to the pendulum still accurate for Twenty First Century organizations? Ilya Prigogine, a Nobel Prize winning scientist, suggests that many processes in nature (including perhaps those exhibited by organizations) don't match very well with the mechanistic world of the pendulum. Rather, the world is more likely to resemble a fire. Fire is a perplexing problem in the history of science. Prigogine notes that modern scientists, in an effort to create a coherent mechanistic model of the world, ignore the complex, transformative processes of fire, concentrating only on the capacity to generate heat. Fire became a heat machine for scientists and was treated as a mechanistic process.

Fire is an irreversible process: it consumes something that cannot be reconstructed. Those of us who live in the San Francisco Bay Area were tragically attuned to this phenomenon during the early 1990s, as we watched the irreversible destruction of our neighbor's homes in the Oakland Firestorm. These homes could never be "unburned." There would never be a readjustment in the community that was destroyed by the fire. There could only be the construction of new homes and a new community. Many other processes of change and transformation are similarly irreversible. Avalanches can never be undone, nor can Pandora's Box ever be closed once the lid is opened. We release organizational truths in moments of frustration or anger and can never return them to the Box. We tentatively consider a change in organizational structure, but the word gets out and we are soon stuck with this change whether we like it or not. We become bound up in complex and paradoxical relationships and can't undo them—except by divorce. The equilibrium has been disturbed, chaos often follows, and there is no returning home as the same person we were when we left. Time moves in one direction and cannot be reversed.

A second remarkable characteristic of fire is its ephemeral nature. It is all process and not much substance. As Prigogine notes, the Newtonian sciences concentrated on substances and the ways in

which forces operated on various substances. It became the science of being. Fire, by contrast, is a science of becoming. Science of being, notes Prigogine, focuses on the states of a system, whereas a science of becoming focused on temporal changes—such as the flickering of a flame. Fire demands a focus not on the outcomes of a production process, but on the nature of the process itself. As adults, we often focus on the outcomes of our children’s creative work. We admire their drawings of sunsets or battles among alien forces. Yet, our children tend to focus on the process of drawing. Their picture is not a static portrait. Rather it is story that is unweaving as the child places various lines on the page. In a similar manner we must often focus on the ways in which decisions are made in organizations, or the styles being used to manage employees, rather than focusing on the final decisions that are made or the relative success of the employee’s performance.

Unfortunately, organizational processes, like fires, are elusive. They are hard to measure or even document short or long term impact. Once a fire has begun, one can’t unburn what has already been consumed. One can extinguish the fire, but a certain amount of damage has already been done and a certain amount of warmth has already been generated. Once a leader has changed the way in which she compensates her employees, there is no turning back. Once a leader has begun to talk with his subordinates in a candid manner about their performance, he can’t return to a previous period of indirect feedback and performance reviews. Once the story has been told, there is no returning to the moment before the story was first told. There is no untelling a story.

The implications of organizational irreversibility are profound, for major problems often emerge when organizational fires are mistaken for organizational pendulums. The 1991 Soviet coup, for instance, appears at least from a short-term perspective to exemplify an irreversible, combustible form of change. Whereas the coup leaders thought that the Soviet Union would continue to operate as a pendulum with each new group of leaders restoring the government to its previous state, the people on the streets saw this as an opportunity to bring about a fire—a second order change. There was going to be a change in the very process of change itself. This new order of things was not one of restoration, but rather one of transformation. Even if the new Russian order fails, there will never be a return to the old order. There will never again be a Soviet Union as we knew it during the years of the Cold War. The story cannot be untold. A similar tale can be told about the Arab Spring and about the remarkable events that have occurred in many Mid-Eastern countries.

If, in fact, an organizations territory is made up of countless pendulums and fires, and people keep thinking that the reality is all pendulums, it’s no wonder that people are continually upset and keep doing the same things about it unsuccessfully.

As someone said, “It’s not chaos that drives us crazy. It’s the false expectation of order.”