Chapter 2

On Board the Ark - The Storm We Are Weathering

Noah built his Ark in preparation for a great storm. We are faced with a storm of considerable magnitude in our mid-21st Century world. Let's consider the nature of the stormy conditions we are now facing. The leaders of organizations in the 21st Century often must deal with major challenges associated with the anxiety experienced by specific members of their organization, as well as the diffuse anxiety that pervades specific departments in the leader's organization or the entire organization. This anxiety can be induced in many different ways—and there are multiple sources of organizational anxiety.

As leaders, we often face the "perfect storm" of organizational challenge and anxiety. Perhaps the easiest way to sum up the multiple sources of challenge and anxiety is to evoke the now commonly used acronym: VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity). To this we add conditions of turbulence and contradiction (VUCA-Plus). The challenges in a VUCA-Plus environment involve both determining what is "real" and how one predicts and makes decisions based on an assessment of this elusive reality.

Peter Armentrout's Storm

It is several sessions later. Catherine Townsend has helped Peter consider ways in which to use other best practices in launching his outdoor Lighting project. Peter has taken on several 'homework" assignments and moved forward in identifying someone that can lead this project and finding the funds within his budget for bringing this person in. Catherine and Peter decide at this point that they want to back off a bit and consider the "broader picture." What is happening out in the world that could (or will) impact on Peter's business in the near future. If he is planning to retire and transfer ownership of his business, then he needs to position this business so that it will be attractive to someone else who will run it in the near and (hopefully) distant future.

With Catherine's assistance, Peter begins to study and reflect on the nature of the world in which he is operating in California and Oregon. This exploration is Legacy Leadership with an emphasis on "legacy." It is also a vigorous version of appreciative "leaning into the future." After spending several weeks reading several publications related to the nursery business, Peter discovers that his business will soon (or perhaps is now) operating in a "storm." Multiple challenges are swirling around his business. These include the persistent drought and competing on-line nursery business of which he was already aware—and with he has already addressed.

In addition, Peter has become increasingly aware of the growing hydroponics business that is being involved not only in the growing of marijuana but also other plants that have not traditionally been grown in North America. Then there is the matter of marijuana itself. How does its legalization and exponential growth impact Peter's traditional nursery business. Then there is the matter of large companies bringing many more plants into their offices. This not only makes their offices more attractive and "livable (important since employees want to work at home), but also increases the "health" of these work environments. Should Peter (or his business in the future) get into the corporate world?

Peter and Catherine explore these challenging conditions during several coaching sessions. All of these conditions lead Peter not to greater clarify, but instead to greater confusion, greater anxiety, more sleepless nights, and an even greater desire to retire and somehow "get away from it all." A cabin in the forests near Ashland sounds good. Catherine has to help Peter move off the ledge. "Yes, these conditions are all challenging; however, they can be addressed." Catherine points out how several of the best practices – including Peter's favorite Best Practice 1—can be of great value in this regard. She points, in particular, to Best Practice 4 and its emphasis on finding and welcoming differences of perspective and practice.

How does Peter find this diversity within his own organization? Perhaps he needs to listen more intently to his younger employees. He might build an advisory panel or attend some "futuristic" seminars. Perhaps part of his succession plan should be the ongoing development and education of his own employees so that they can purchase or at least provide

guidance to someone who is buying the business. Catherine and Peter spend a fair amount of time talking about the swirling storm. Peter is feeling a bit better and achieving a quality night of sleep.

The VUCA-Plus Environment

We will dwell briefly on the meaning to be assigned to each of the VUCA terms and then suggest how we might expand on VUCA. *Complexity* concerns the many elements and dynamic interaction among elements that have to be considered, while *Volatility* refers to the rate and shifting rate of change among the elements.

The other two terms have to do with epistemology (the way in which knowledge is acquired and reality is defined). *Ambiguity* concerns the assessment of both the evidence available regarding reality and the meaning assigned to this reality. The fourth term, *Uncertainty*, is about the stability of any assessment being made regarding reality. Does reality change over a short period of time? Why do an extensive assessment if our world is constantly shifting?

VUCA is deservedly becoming the coin-of-the-realm among contemporary organizational analysts. These four terms (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) clearly capture much of the dynamics swirling around in the perfect storm of contemporary organizational life.

We have offered a similar description of our current environment. However, our categories differ a bit and expand upon VUCA. We have identified four challenges: complexity, unpredictability (uncertainty), turbulence and contradiction. Two of these challenges align directly with VUCA, while the other two (turbulence and contradiction) expand on the VUCA environment. [i]

In describing *Turbulence*, we turn to a metaphor offered by Peter Vaill[ii], who suggests that we are living in a "white water" world. We have suggested that this white-water world represents a turbulent system.[iii] Furthermore, we have proposed that this white-water system incorporates four subsystems that are exemplified by the properties of a turbulent stream: (1) rapid change (flowing segment of the stream), (2) cyclical change (the stream's whirlpools), (3) stability/non-change (the "stagnant" segment of the stream), and (4) chaos (the segment of a stream existing between the other three segments).

With regard to *Contradiction*, we have identified the frequent presence of contradictory constructions and interpretations of reality and the differing meaning assigning to the reality that is being constructed.[iv] We suggest that we are living and leading in a world of Irony and must make decisions that are contingent and subject to frequent review and modification. Obviously, Turbulence and Contradiction are strongly influenced by and tightly interweave with all four of the VUCA challenges. We will use the term *VUCA-Plus* with this expansion on the description of a VUCA environment.

Having identified the fundamental nature of the four VUCA terms, while adding two additional terms, we turn to the nature of organizational anxiety that is evoked in this VUCA-Plus environment. We then consider ways in which 21st Century organizations – and especially the leaders of these organizations—contain this anxiety and transform it (via something called "metabolism") so that the anxiety might be managed effectively.[v] Finally, we identify several tools that can be used by these leaders in creating and maintaining these containers and transformational processes.

The Nature of Anxiety

VUCA-Plus produces anxiety at both the individual and collective level. It seems that anxiety is quite contagious. One anxious person in an organization (or any group) can readily spread this anxiety to everyone else in the organization. In some ways this contagion is quite adaptive. When human beings were living on the African savannah, they were among the weakest and slowest creatures to populate this often threat-filled environment.

It seems that we humans survived (and ultimately thrived) by working collaboratively via language and strong family and clan bonding. We all wanted to know if something was threatening one or more members of our group so that we could act together to fight or flee from the source of the threat. Anxiety served this purpose.

Anxiety as a Signal

Many years ago, Sigmund Freud wrote about the signal function of anxiety.[vi] At the time, he was pointing to the way in which anxiety alerts us to an important psychic reality: we are moving into dangerous territory regarding unconscious processes. We can expand on Freud's analysis by considering the collective signaling function served by anxiety in warning us (as families or clans) about sources of danger that are real (such as predators, crop failure or the pending invasion of an adversarial clan)—or are anticipated or imagined.

We can probe for a moment into the neurobiological basis of collective (and contagious) signaling anxiety. In recent years, neurobiologists have recognized the very important role played by a specific neurotransmitter in the lives of human beings. This neurotransmitter is oxytocin. It is sometimes called the "bonding" and "nurturing" chemical – and we human beings have more of this chemical coursing through our brains and veins than most other animals. Oxytocin pulls us together and makes us particularly fearful of being alone and isolated from other members of our family and clan. We want to be close to others and feel threatened when others feel threatened.

This secretion of oxytocin could be considered the basis of empathy and might even be mediated by something called "mirror neurons" which are activated in us when we experience the wounding (physical or psychological) of other people. While the role played by mirror neurons is still quite controversial, there is very little dispute regarding the typical (and necessary) bonding of human beings with one another and the high level of sensitivity regarding our discomfort with witnessing the potential or actual suffering of other people with whom we are bonded – hence the contagious and signaling nature of anxiety.

Real and Imagined Lions

Clearly, we are attuned to the signal of threat transmitted by other people. This signal can be based on "legitimate" threats: the lion can be stalking us or the tribe living in the next valley can actually be plotting to take over our hunting ground or pastureland. However, as observed by Robert Sapolsky, we are also quite adept at imagining lions—and falsely concluding that our neighboring tribe is plotting against us.[vii] Thus, there can be "false alarms" that we have to manage with just as much skill as the alarms based in reality.

Part of our role as leaders is to discern the difference between valid signals and invalid signals. This can be quite a challenge in the world of VUCA-Plus—and this is an important element in the metabolism and re-introduction of anxiety into an organization. As parents we need to help our children sort out the difference between the "real" bad things in life and the "unreal" monsters lurking under their bed at night (equivalent in contemporary life to the imaginary lions of the African savannah). As leaders, we similarly have to assist with addressing the imagined VUCA-Plus monsters lingering under our organizational beds.

Anxiety-Management

We have described the nature of a VUCA-Plus environment and the unique leadership challenges associated with the anxiety evoked in this environment. We are ready to consider ways in which a leader can contain this anxiety and transform (metabolize) this anxiety to re-introduce it in manageable form to other members of their organization.

We turn first to the nature and variety of organizational containers and then consider the remarkable process of metabolism as originally described by the psychoanalytically oriented object relations theorist of the Tavistock Institute in London.

Anxiety and the Container

In his work as a psychotherapist (particularly in group settings), Wilfred Bion described the nature of containment and metabolism of anxiety.[viii] Bion suggested in several different ways that effective leaders (initially as group therapy facilitators) will contain and then metabolize the anxiety of those with whom they are working. With its metabolism, the anxiety can be reintroduced into the therapy session in a form and manner that is more easily engaged by a client (whether in an individual therapy session or in a group therapy session).

Bion, and other psychologists influenced by his work, recognized that the same process is engaged in organization. The effective leader serves as barrier between the threatening and anxiety-producing outside world and the inner world of the organization. In many ways, the therapist or organizational leader operates in the same way as an effective

parent who must provide a buffer for their children. Both the parent and child confront many anxiety-filled challenges—especially those associated with balancing the protection of the child, on the one hand, with providing the child, on the other hand, with multiple opportunities to develop in their capacity to confront and adapt to their ever-expanding world.

This recipe offered by Bion to therapists, group facilitators, organizational leaders (and parents) is all well and good, but what does it really mean and how does a leader (therapist, facilitator or parent) go about engaging the multi-faceted role of container, metabolizer and re-introducer of the anxiety?

The Nature of Containment

What does it mean to contain anxiety? More generally, what is the nature of psychological containers in our life and in the life of our organization? We begin by addressing the second question and then considering how the containment of anxiety works. We will be making the case that containment can occur in many ways and in many settings. In essence, containment is about finding sanctuary in one's life—especially when confronting the challenges of VUCA-Plus.

Vulnerability, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, turbulence and contradiction are not new to us living in the 21st Century. And we are not the first people to yearn for sanctuary. Back in the 1930s, with World War II looming in the near future and the world limping its way out of a major recession, there was a strong need for sanctuary-- as captured in the popular film, *Lost Horizons*. Ronald Colman played the role of a very successful British statesman who is kidnapped and taken to a remote land called "*Shangri-La*." For Colman, as for many of us, this location held great attraction. It was free of pain and strife.

Shangri-La also provided an opportunity for reflection on the complex and turbulent world outside, while giving those who entered its cloistered walls (in this case, a hidden valley) the opportunity for personal growth and renewal. Colman, like many of us who have created or stumbled into "Shangri-La," found that the hardest part is leaving and returning to a world that he no longer appreciated. However, "Shangri-La" like all sanctuaries exists precisely because of our need to remain engaged in an active life in which we address the critical needs and concerns of our family, our organization and our community.

The Varieties of Containment and Sanctuary

Psychological containers come in many forms and there are many types of sanctuary. We turn now to a brief and more systematic exploration of five types of containers—and sanctuaries. They are personal psychic containers and containers existing within relationships. Containers can also be defined by temporary boundaries: events can serve as containers. Special locations are noteworthy as containers and sanctuaries.

Finally—and most directly relevant to this set of fundamental concepts--certain leadership functions can provide containment of anxiety. Leadership, in turn, often works alongside one other container (that might be the most important within an organizational setting). This final type of container is the culture of the organizations. In turn first to the most personal type of container.

Personal Imagery as a Container of Anxiety: In a beautifully poignant song ("And So It Goes"), written by the popular singer, Billy Joel, a sanctuary is described that exists in every person's heart.[ix] This part of our heart will always be "safe and strong." It is where we "heal the wounds from lovers past/Until a new one comes along." Sanctuaries of a similar nature exist in our heart and hopefully are supported by our organizations and society as a means of healing other wounds and providing space and time for needed reflection and inquiry. In our world of VUCA-PLUS, there is a great need for Billy Joel's "safe and strong" sanctuary.

In one of his gentle stories from the Prairie Home companion radio program about life in a small Minnesota town ("Lake Wobegon"), Garrison Keiller speaks about the "storm home" that was assigned to him by his school when he was a small boy.[x] Keiller lived in the country and had to get to school by bus. Consequently, to prepare for the possibility that he might be stranded in town as a result of a snow blizzard, the school gave him (and the other children living in the country) an alternative home to go to that is located in town.

Keeler never had to go to this home; however, he often walked by his "storm home" and reflected on the loving, supportive nature of the couple who were his "storm parents." He often thought of this man and woman and their

house when things were going bad or when he was discouraged. He fantasized that this couple had specifically picked him out as their "storm child" and that they would welcome him with open arms during difficult times.

We may similarly need a "storm home" as adults working in a VUCA-Plus world. The "storm home" of the mind may be created through use of a technique or ritual that provides internal support and encouragement for our difficult decisions and risk taking behavior. In essence, we pat ourselves on the back or find a way (through meditation, daydreaming or quiet reflection) to calm ourselves down and gain a sense of reassurance.

A colleague who presides over an educational institution found that he could gently touch his forehead when under stress and evoke with this touch a sense of personal calmness. These moments of personal sanctuary during the day may be essential components in any postmodern survival kit. Another colleague ensures that she sets aside one day each week for her writing. A third friend insists on swimming in the San Francisco Bay every day during lunchtime. In each instance, an internal sanctuary that is "safe and strong" has been created for both healing and reflection.

Ultimately, we create containers within our own head and heart. This is where the true sanctuaries in our life reside – and where we not only find refuge from anxiety and real or imagined lions, but also find restoration, renewal and new knowledge and insights. As Bion noted, metabolism is ultimately an internal psychic process.

Relationships as a Container of Anxiety: There is a second important way in which a container can be truly psychological—and truly designed to contain anxiety. These special forms of containment might be found in long-term accepting and supportive relationship with a family member or friend. They might also be found in our moments of play with a child or cherished pet. We return home, hopefully, to an environment of warmth and love—a remarkably important sanctuary for many of us. The container can also be found in the caring attitude of a special teacher, coach, mentor or trainer. If we are fortunate, we can reflect back on a special person in our life who provided guidance, understanding and perhaps a gentle kick in the pants – all elements of effective containment (and central to the metabolism process).

Then there are the important temporary relationships in our life: the therapeutic relationship established with a skillful psychotherapist or counsellor, the wise retreat facilitator and workshop leader. During the 20th Century, Warren Bennis and Philip Slater prophetically suggested that we (in the West) are creating "temporary societies."[xi] We would be moving from a world in which most of the people with whom we affiliate have been a part of our life for many years to a world in which we are often interacting for a few moments with people we just met. While, on the one hand, these temporary relationships can be part and parcel of a VUCA-Plus world, they can also be the source of short-term, important containers. We often can speak more candidly and take greater risks with "strangers" than with the people we must life with and work with every day.

Finally, we can look to the special relationships that are formed within organizational settings. These are the "play spaces" that are created when an organization sets us a "skunk work" task force or sets aside a weekend each year for a retreat in which all members of an organization (regardless of formal status) get to share their ideas and dreams regarding the future of the organization. A setting is created, and facilitation processes are put in place that enable management and union leaders to share perspectives and seek to identify mutually satisfactory solutions to shared problems.

Collateral organization is one term that has been used to label these unique relations-based containers. The collateral organization is established on a short-term basis. It is set up a way that enables members of the organization to relate to one another in a new manner—hopefully reducing the anxiety associated with the issues being addressed and creating conditions for metabolism of these issues. We will have much more to say about collateral organizations in Chapter Nine.

Special Events as Containers of Anxiety: Psychological containers can be engaged through the structuring of time intervals. There is a temporal demarcation. Now is the time for . . . something different. The 50-minute hour in psychotherapy, for instance, is an important container (especially in the containment of anxiety aroused during a therapy session). During much of the 20th Century we lived with the temporal container called the 9 to 5 workday, the 5-day work week, and the non-working weekend and vacation. With the introduction of the computer, internet and home office, this temporary container has often been eliminated.

Many years ago, Matthew Miles identified the important role played by temporary systems in 20th Century society.[xii] These temporary systems might be particularly important to engage in our VUCA-Plus world. Miles suggested that temporary systems are to be found throughout our society but are often given very little attention. Examples of temporary organizational systems that Miles offered include carnivals, theater, celebrations, games, retreats, workshops, conferences, task forces, project teams, coffee breaks, and office parties. At a more personal level, Miles identified love affairs and psychotherapeutic sessions as temporary systems.

The time-delineated container can thus be a specific event (such as Marti Gras or New Years Eve at Time Square). This often is an event that allows us to act in new ways—ways that defuse our anxiety or at least provide us with the opportunity for a short period of time to escape from our imagined lions. The event can actually be a ceremony or ritual that takes us to another plane – what Victor Turner described as a threshold experience (a state of "liminality").[xiii] This can be a graduation ceremony, a wedding, a Bar Mitzvah or a birthday party. The real lions in our life are set aside for a short while—so that we might celebrate our success in defeating past lions or moving into a new life stage that will enable us to do a better job of confronting lions.

Building on the work of Victor Turner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi identifies temporary settings that provide the unique threshold between boredom (lack of challenge), on the one hand, and anxiety (too much challenge) on the other hand. He identified this threshold experience as "flow."[xiv] He suggests that flow can be found in the many enthralling moments we have all experienced as rock climbers, jazz musicians or chess players. We can even experience a "micro-flow" when twirling a pencil or paper clip in our hand during a particularly boring meeting. If we were to blend Csikszentmihalyi with Bion, the outcome might be a suggestion that Flow is found in a contained experience and that flow provides a metabolism for the person living temporarily in this threshold between boredom and anxiety.

Location as a Container of Anxiety: A psychological container can be a sanctuary located in physical space. These containers have physical boundaries. We enter a safe space – such as a walled garden or therapy office and feel safe. Donald Winnicott identified something he called *play space* in which we safely search for a new and clearer sense of self.[xv] This is the place where (as children) we built forts or constructed family narratives (often in a doll house) as children.

Play space is created in therapeutic settings where art, dance or drama are engaged – or where children (or adults) manipulate various objects and create stories in a sand tray. These settings serve as play space containers and create conditions for effective metabolism of anxiety-saturated issues in our lives (or the lives of our children).

Containers can be structures—ranging in size from trunk in which memorable objects are kept, to a special room in our home (such as a "man/woman cave), to a majestic, sacred cathedral. The location-based container often serves as a retreat—a "safe place" within or outside the organization. Some Japanese firms, for instance, provide private rooms where employees can go to let loose their frustrations and anger. However, sanctuaries (almost by definition) usually exist outside of an organizational context. They are found in remote locations, hallowed grounds, beautiful settings or formally constructed retreat centers, spas and health resorts.

Leadership as a Container of Anxiety: The fifth way in which metabolism takes place in an organization can be traced directly to the leadership of the organization. This fifth type of container begins to move us into the realm of metabolism—for the leader (like the parent), according to Bion, often plays a key role in the metabolism of anxiety. It is the leader who must personally hold onto the organization's anxiety and not allow it to leak out and infect the entire organization. This often means that the leader holds back information about what is happening outside the organization (especially potential or impending threats or shifts in the marketplace). Very careful discernment must take place at this point: the leader must not be in the business of lying or spend too much time in denial.

Obviously, no member of the organization will appreciate being left out in the dark about the fate of their organization – or their job. Even if it means being anxious for a while, the news must be delivered—but the leader can pause for a moment (or a short period of time) to not only determine how best to deliver the troubling news, but also determine the best time to communicate the critical information. This is critical metabolism.

The challenge of containment for the leader of an organization is either reduced or amplified by the way in which the organization's anxiety is addressed through the culture of the organization. It is to this final, critical, mode of containment that we now turn.

Organizational Culture as a Container of Anxiety: There is this one other type of container that I wish to identify. It is particularly important when considering the role played by leaders in the containment and metabolization of anxiety. This container is the culture of an organization. It is through the culture of an organization that anxiety can be either accentuated or contained. It is also through the culture of an organization, that the bonding of its members can be engaged in the constructive reframing and redirecting of anxiety (the metabolism).

There is another benefit. A strong culture enables members of an organization to better understand, overcome or adapt to the real (or imagined) threats inherent in the anxiety. In other words, metabolism occurs when members of an organization collectively (culturally) create a narrative about the source of the anxiety, the current impact of the anxiety on the organization, and the way(s) in which the anxiety will be reduced and/or the sources of the anxiety will be addressed.

As Edgar Schein noted, this often means creating, maintaining or modifying existing organizational narratives.[xvi] This is a critical and quite tangible form of metabolism, for organizations are, in a very real sense, nothing more (or less) than sustained narratives. As proponents of appreciative inquiry (AI) (reference) have noted, the shift in an organization's narrative might be the most powerful way in which to bring about change and improvement in the functioning of an organization. Schein suggests that an organizational culture should be built on the narratives of past successes.[xvii] The AI practitioners would agree to the narrative—and we would suggest that this focus on an organization's real (not imagined) strengths and successes can be a highly effective mode of metabolism.

The fundamental interplay between the containment of anxiety and the formation of organizational cultures was carefully and persuasively documented by Isabel Menzies Lyth (1988). She describes ways in which nurses in an English hospital cope with the anxiety that is inevitably associated with issues of health, life and death. Menzies Lyth notes how the hospital in which nurses work help to ameliorate or at least protect the nurses from anxiety. She suggests that a health care organization is primarily in the business of reducing this anxiety. On a daily basis, all other functions of the organization are secondary to this anxiety-reduction function.

It is specifically the culture of the organization that serves as the primary vehicle for addressing anxiety and stress. The culture of an organization is highly resistant to change precisely because change directly threatens the informal system that has been established in the organization to help those working in it to confront and make sense of the anxiety inherent in the operations of the organization.

Menzies Lyth's observations have been reaffirmed in many other organizational settings. Anxiety is to be found in most contemporary organizations and efforts to reduce this anxiety are of prominent importance. Somehow an organization that is inclined to evoke anxiety among its employees must discover or construct a buffer that both isolates (contains) the anxiety and addresses the realistic, daily needs of its employees.

Containing the Anxiety

In our brief reflection on the diverse containers of anxiety, we begin to discover the answer to our first question: how is anxiety contained? Our identification of sanctuaries as containers of anxiety suggests that a protective function is critical. A sanctuary isolated or protects us for at least a short period of time from anxiety (or perhaps even the source of the anxiety). In this protected state we can do something with the anxiety while it is not engulfing us. We can for a specific period of time not be anxious about our anxiety – and can metabolize it (as we will describe in the next section).

Our reflection on the role played by culture as a container takes us to a somewhat different place. The culture of our organization (or family or clan) provides a structure and process for finding meaning and purpose in anxiety. We find out why we are anxious and can better identify the source of the anxiety. This assignment of meaning and etiology (cause/source) might not be accurate.

Culture does a great job of imagining the size and shape of the imagined lion and shows us, like Tarzan in the 1940s movies, how we are going to defeat the lion with our own bare hands. What culture does do is reduce our anxiety about anxiety (such as a sanctuary accomplishes). This reassurance can, in turn, lead us to a constructive metabolism of the anxiety. It can, on the other hand, lead us astray. We believe that we really have identified the lion and its true intent. And we have identified the Tarzan-like person, group or policy that will defeat or at least adequately defend us against the attacking lion.

This first set of proposals regarding how anxiety is contained can be supplemented by many other side-strategies of containment – such as keeping the anxiety from spreading to other factions inside or outside the organization and recognizing that specific anxiety-reducing services should be provided to members of the organization (such as provision of employee assistance programs) or to the entire organization (such as an organization-wide picnic or award ceremony). More generally, containers provide direction for how anxiety will get addressed on a daily basis in the organization. This is where culture plays a key role.

Menzies Lyth (1988) suggested that anxiety gets addressed on a daily basis through the "social defense system"—that is, the patterns of interpersonal and group relationships that exist in the organization. Other organizational theorists and researchers, for example Deal & Kennedy (2000) and Schein (1992), similarly suggest that the rituals, routines, stories, and norms (implicit values) of the organization help members of the organization manage anxiety inside the organization. Yet, these rituals, routines, stories and norms are not a random assortment of activities. Rather, they cluster together and form a single, coherent dimension of the organization—they create meaning as well as contain anxiety. This single, coherent dimension resides at the heart of the organization's culture.

As Edgar Schein has noted, the culture of an organization is the residue of the organization's success in confronting varying anxiety-producing conditions in the world.[xviii] To the extent that an organization is adaptive in responding to and reducing pervasive anxiety associated with the processes of organizational learning and related functions of the enterprise, the existing cultures of this organization will be reinforced, deepen and become increasingly resistant to challenge or change.

It is in this way that organizational culture and organizational containers produce the most effective solutions for addressing the anxiety and sources of anxiety facing the organization. And it is the organization's leader who plays the critical role of creating and maintaining the container and providing the metabolism of the anxiety—and it is to this remarkable and perhaps mysterious metabolism that we will turn—but first a personal note.

Personal Reflections

We find Menzies Lyth insights to be particularly helpful in our own work with organizations that tend to generate considerable anxiety—either because of the nature of the work being performed or clients being served, or because of the challenges being faced by the organization in our VUCA-Plus environment. We find that anxiety is likely to high in educational organizations, prisons, asylums and medical facilities.

It is anxiety-provoking to be a student, prisoner, mental patient or medical patient. It is equally anxiety-provoking to be someone who is serving these men, women and children. We also find high levels of anxiety in organizations such as churches, high tech organizations and human service agencies that confront VUCA-Plus related matters on a daily basis.

All three of us are called on frequently to work with anxiety-filled organizations as an organizational consultant or leadership coach. We find that organizational culture plays a very powerful role in each of these organizations and have prepared many reports describing the nature and dynamics of these cultures for use by the leaders of these organizations.

It is clear to all three of us that organizational culture and leadership go hand and glove in seeking to contain anxiety and that the metabolism that often takes place (or doesn't take place) is strongly influenced by organizational culture. With this final, personal observation in place, we turn to the nature and dynamics of organizational metabolism.

Containment and Metabolism

What does it mean to manage and transform anxiety? To use Bion's term, what does it mean to metabolize anxiety? The term "metabolism" was borrowed by Bion and other psychoanalytic theorist from the field of biology. Beginning with Sigmund Freud's "scientific project" – eventually becoming psychoanalysis—there was a strong affinity among practitioners and theorist in this domain of the healing arts (and sciences) with human physiology and the broader biological sciences.

In the case of biological metabolism, we find a process concerned with chemical reactions in the body of all mammals (and many other living organisms). Through metabolism we covert food to energy that is needed for many cellular operations (creation of proteins, lipids, nucleic acids and carbohydrates as well as the elimination of waste). A similar

process is described by Bion – though metabolism now involves the conversion and redirection of psychic rather than physiological elements from an "unhealthy" (maladaptive) to a "healthy" (adaptive) state.

Bion's Own Version of Metabolism

We begin a description of the psychological metabolism process by turning to that offered by Bion. Two fundamental elements exist, according to Bion, in human consciousness and thinking. One of these elements is labeled *beta*. These elements are the unmetabolized thoughts, emotions and bodily states that we always experience—whether they come from the outside world or from inside our individual and collective psyches.

Among the inside collective elements are the three widely acknowledged basic assumptions that underlie group functioning: dependency, fight-flight and pairing.[xix] The basic assumptions themselves are likely to dominate group functioning if the elements of anxiety are not metabolized. These basic assumption elements along with many other beta elements (such as dreams and collective myths and fantasies) are associated with anxiety. They represent some very important and often maladaptive elements in the human psyche that need to be transformed.

Alpha and Beta: For Bion, the metabolized elements—that he labels *alpha*—are those that we can readily think about and articulate. In the case of anxiety operating in an organizational setting, these metabolized alpha elements would include the identified and articulated cause of the anxiety, as well as the impact of anxiety on such critical organizational functions as personnel management, conflict-management, problem-solving, and decision-making.[xx]

Perhaps most importantly, alpha elements are often valid perceptions of reality and processes associated with the capacity of individuals and organizations to learn from experience.[xxi] Today, in an organizational setting, we often describe this latter alpha state as the establishment and maintenance of a learning organization.[xxii] This setting is one in which there is an ongoing testing of reality and a desire to learn from organizational mistakes – and we would add organizational successes.[xxiii]

From Beta to Alpha: This is all well and good—we move beta elements to alphas individually and collectively. This is a valid description of successful metabolism among individuals and in organizational settings, based on observations and analyses offered by Bion and many other object-relations oriented therapists and group facilitators. However, this description doesn't tell us much about how metabolism takes place. How do we turn Beta elements into Alpha elements?

We would suggest that Bion tends to focus on the fundamental strategies of psychoanalysis in his writing about metabolism. These include such ego-based processes as the slow and careful introduction or re-introduction of unconscious (beta) elements into consciousness, so that they might be tested against reality and either isolated or transformed into productive action (sublimation).

These also include a focus on dreams, fantasies and childhood memories, with the therapist helping their client not only gaining access to this material but also determining its accuracy and more importantly its impact on current perceptions of relationships and reality, and its impact of current decisions that are being made and actions that are being taken.

What about at a collective (group or organizational) level? Much as a dream is interpreted and implications are drawn regarding how the dream's content tells the dreamer something about their own wishes and fears, so beta elements in the life of an organization (or individual members of the organization) can be interpreted and can be sources of new learning. Bion is inclined to emphasize that once these elements are brought to consciousness, the members (and in particular the leaders) of an organization will be open to new learning from their continuing experiences in the organization.

When the conversion of beta to alpha is successful, earning is not distorted or dominated by unprocessed Beta elements (such as the basic group assumptions). Successful conversion for Bion involves the close alignment of learning to an accurate appraisal of ongoing experiences. Ego functions are in charge—whether this concerns the personal psyches of individuals or the collective psyche of a group or organization.

Alternative Versions of Metabolism

For Bion, metabolism often seems to be all about thinking and learning. Given this emphasis, I would suggest that we can turn to several other theorists who have more recently focused on the processes of thinking and learning.

Kahneman's System One and Two: we have already mentioned the first of these theorists, Daniel Kahneman, when considering the containment of anxiety. Kahneman is the Nobel-prize winning behavioral economist who drew an important distinction concerning the speed of thinking.[xxiv] He describes as system (one) of fast thinking. It is a process that builds on intuition and readily applied heuristics (such as relying on the most recent information received). Kahneman's fast thinking tends to leave anxiety-filled thoughts and images unmetabolized (beta elements).

Kahneman contrasts this with a second system (Two) that builds on slow thinking. This system requires a stepping back from one's immediate experience, checking out the validity of specific assumptions, challenging the heuristics, and learning from both successful and failed engagements with the thinker's world. Bion's anxiety-filled thoughts and feelings can be metabolized (becoming alpha elements) through engagement in Kahneman's system of slow thinking.

We offer Kahneman's own words in providing a summary description of his two systems:[xxv]

> *System 1* operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control.

> *System 2* allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including comloo65 computations. The operations of System 2 are often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration. . . .

System 1 is described as effortlessly originating impressions and feelings that are the main sources of the explicit beliefs and deliberate choices of System 2. The automatic operations of System 1 generate surprisingly complex patterns of ideas, but only the slower System 2 can construct thoughts in an orderly series of steps.

In many ways, as we have noted, Kahneman's fast thinking yields Bion's Beta elements --- though Kahneman tends to focus on the influence of heuristics rather than the influence of unconscious and often repressed content (the proclivity of Bion and his psychoanalytic colleagues). Kahneman's slow thinking similarly helps to yield Bion's Alpha element—however, once again, Kahneman attends more to the head than the heart.

Given this at least partial alignment, how might Kahneman contribute to our understanding of Bion's metabolism? We would point to the term used by Kahneman to describe this second mode of thinking: it is about slowing down. When we slow down and refuse to jump to immediate conclusions then we are increasing the chances of metabolism. This slowing down is particularly important to engage when we are anxious (individually or collectively).

We desperately want to reduce or resolve the anxious feelings. We are getting "signaled" all over the place. The alarms have rung out. We want to speed up and find quick solutions. Instead, we must slow down and determine the source and nature of the anxiety – which is not easy to do. The container, once again, is critical. This is where sanctuaries come into play. We find a place to think and feel. We pray for guidance or talk to a good friend. We step out at lunch time and go to a nearby park or run around the indoor track at the nearby gym. We schedule an appointment with our therapist, life coach or pastor.

We would also point to a second implication to be drawn from Kahneman's description of System 1 and System 2. As noted in the passage we quoted, System 2 is dependent on System 1 for many of System 2 beliefs and choices. It is much too simple (System 1 thinking) to declare that System 2 is purely rational and devoid of distortions and assumptions.

Similarly, we must remember that the content of Bion's Alpha elements come out of Beta content—so are not immune to bias or the intrusion of unconscious content. Put in broader, psychoanalytic terms, the Ego derives its energy from the Id and Superego. As a result, the Ego must always make compromises in its engagement with reality: the piper must be paid. The Id and Superego must be acknowledged if Ego is to gain its energy.

Bateson's Higher Order Thinking: Beyond this basic suggestion that we slow down and find a time and place for reflection, there is the matter of engagement in higher order thinking and reasoning. In Kahneman's world this refers particularly to reflecting on the operating heuristics. Do we overestimate the probable occurrence of certain highly dramatic outcomes? Is there a good reason for us to rely on simply stated analyses of complex situations (prevalent

in the VUCA-Plus environment)? Do we always turn to the same sources for advice and avoid perspectives that are troubling, contradictory or anxiety-producing (particularly unwelcomed when we are trying to reduce our anxiety)?

Many years ago, the remarkable polymath, Gregory Bateson wrote about first and second order thinking and learning.[xxvi] First order learning and thinking concerns the ability to improve on what we are already thinking and doing. This form of learning and thinking is dominant in our daily life – and relates directly to Kahneman's heuristics (and Bion's Beta elements). Conversely, second-order learning and thinking is about consideration of alternative actions and alternative ways of framing one's current experiences.

Even more importantly, second order thinking and second order learning are about thinking-about-thinking and learning-about-learning. We pause, slow down our thinking, and consider what lies behind the way we are now thinking and what are the outcomes of our current way of thinking. Metabolism, in other words, is about stepping back and reflecting on the way(s) in which we are perceiving, feeling about, and acting in our world. In Bion's terms, it is about valid learning from experience.

What might second-order thinking and second-order learning look like in an actual organizational setting? We turn to an educational organization with which one of us has consulted. It is a liberal arts college that offers undergraduate degrees in both the arts and sciences. As is the case with the faculty at most academic institutions, there is a major gulf in the way teaching occurs in these two divisions: as noted many years ago, the arts and sciences constitute two different worlds. The faculty members residing in these two worlds embrace quite different ideas about how learning takes place (other than their shared belief in the value of lecturing). The sciences rely on learning in the laboratory, while the arts rely on learning in the studio.

It is traditionally assumed that improvement in the teaching engaged in each of these worlds requires doing a better job of designing and conducting the laboratory (for faculty in the sciences) and designing and conducting the studio (for faculty in the arts). This improvement requires first order learning and change. Rather simple heuristics can readily be applied: improve what you are already doing and/or do what you are already doing more often (or less often). First order learning and change is alive and well. Attend a workshop on new ways to demonstrate combustion in the lab. Extend the studio to two hours (or reduce the Thursday studio by thirty minutes). Meet with members of your own department to share best practices.

What about second order learning and change? At this two-day liberal arts college faculty retreat, a somewhat "radical" process was encouraged and facilitated. It was suggested that a pedagogical bridge be built between the arts and sciences. What would a chemistry studio look like? Could there be a painting laboratory? Perhaps we could also bring in the other humanities: what about a history studio? Sparks of innovative thinking began to ignite for faculty members from both the arts and sciences.

Studio learning often involves students sitting around a still life and sketching the assembled objects from different perspectives. Couldn't physics students or history students explore a specific stellar or political event from different perspectives? What about a sculpture laboratory? Different materials could be used to create a particular sculpted work. How does each material influence the sculping process and the outcome? This would be an interesting experimental question to address in a sculpture laboratory.

This excursion into bridge-building across disciplines exemplifies second order learning and change. Rather than doing the same thing better or more often, we are invited to do something different and to learn from this different action. In the case of the faculty at this liberal arts college, it was not only a matter of teaching in a new manner. It was also a matter of examining current practices from a fresh perspective. Faculty members in the sciences who have been engaged in laboratory teaching for many years, now began to appreciate and share with other faculty members the lessons learned about laboratory education over the years. A similar impact was evident among the arts faculty and studio learning.

We suggest that metabolism took place in this faculty workshop. The anxiety associated with learning something new about how to design an educational experience along with the anxiety of building the bridge was contained in this retreat setting. Bion's alpha elements could be produced from out of the anxiety that was present among faculty as this workshop. A sanctuary and safe/play space were created. The exercise in considering science studios and art laboratories transformed this anxiety into a constructive interdisciplinary and innovative sharing of ideas and

expertise "on the bridge" (as the workshop participants described this workshop experience). Metabolism was taking place. Alpha elements were being produced—and metabolism was not taking place in a therapy office.

*Assumptive Worlds***:** We have offered this brief excursion into the dynamics operating in a faculty workshop partially as a way to introduce another way of envisioning the metabolic process. This third process concerns an even deeper probing of the world we are perceiving, interpreting and acting in. It concerns the differing assumptive worlds in which art and science faculty live, as well as the differing worlds in which we all live—especially in a VUCA-Plus environment.

Elsewhere, one of us has described the primarily elements to be found in the broad assumptive worlds we create and inhabit.[xxvii] These assumptions worlds are based in the social constructions of reality.[xxviii] These constructions, in turn, are strongly influenced by the linguistics of a specific society (both the semantics and syntax) and the dominant paradigm(s) operating in their society or a subset of their society.[xxix]

The assumptive worlds in which we live determine what we choose to see and what we choose to know. At a very basic level, it is about epistemology: what we know that we know (whether or not this is accurate), what we know that we don't know, and what we don't know that we know. Perhaps of greatest importance is a fourth epistemological condition: what we don't know that we don't know (often self-sealed collective ignorance). It is this fourth condition that is directly aligned with the fourth type of issue we have identified in this book: the mystery.

It is the mystery which is most closely aligned with Bion's unprocessed Beta elements. we would suggest that mysterious elements are not just those assigned to the unconscious because they are psychically dangerous--as Bion and his psychoanalytic colleagues might suggest. In many cases, these mysterious Beta elements are those which are simply too large, complex, unpredictable, vulnerable, ambiguous, turbulence, and filled with contradictions to be easily processed. In other words, welcome to the world of VUCA-Plus! It is at this level that metabolization is most challenging. It is at this level that the container—and in particular, the sanctuary—is most needed.

How specifically would metabolism work in addressing the anxiety-saturated challenging of one's assumptive worlds. We have already offered one example of a metabolic process as it operates in a faculty workshop. It is a matter of introducing an alternative frame of reference and, in particular, introducing perspectives held by other participants in a workshop or other people who play an important role in in one's present (or past) life. The empty chair process used in Gestalt-oriented psychotherapy comes to mind, as do many psychodrama techniques. We will be identifying many other strategies throughout this book; however, we will now briefly suggest several assumptive-world related processes.

One way to approach assumptive worlds is offered by our colleague Will Schutz[xxx], who suggested that the most important question to ask is: "what do you know is NOT the problem?" As we explore what has been dismissed (or isolated), the assumptions are likely to be revealed in our life. We can similarly explore an "absurd" idea (such as being brutally honest with our enemy or being playful about a very serious matter) and reflect on the assumptions underlying this assessment of absurdity. Another approach concerns the role played by a leader in opening reflecting on their own assumptions regarding the operations of their unit of the organization. This can be done, as our colleague, Marybeth O'Neill notes, by inviting an executive coach to facilitate this reflection in a group setting (such as a retreat). [xxxi]

A third approach is based on a perspective offered by object-relations therapists (such as Bion): each of us holds multiple and sometimes contradictory emotion-loaded images and ideas (psychic "objects"). As Bion has noted, these objects can be intertwined with the basic collective assumptions operating in a group, as well as other (beta) elements of an individual's or group's assumptive world. Building on O'Neill's approach to transparent executive coaching, a leader (or other members of a team) can identify (with the help of a facilitator) several contradictory elements of their assumptive world. Beta is metabolized into accessible Alpha elements.

A dialogue can then take place with the leader (or other team members) creating a public dialogue between these contradictory assumptions. Alternatively, this dialogue can be engaged by several other members of the team, once the leader (team member) has outlined the major features embedded in each assumption. Other members of the team can then comment on their own thoughts and feelings regarding each assumption—for they are likely to be struggling with similar contradictions.

Conclusions

What does all of this mean? We have identified the need for containers and metabolic processes in helping individuals, groups and entire organizations address the anxiety that is prevalent in a VUCA-Plus environment. Furthermore, we have often noted that a leader plays a key role in managing (or mismanaging) the container and metabolism. The leader must often be the holder of the anxiety. This is a very difficult emotion to retain.

It is very tempting for a leader to try directing the anxiety and attendant anger and frustration to other people inside and outside the organization. The anxiety filled thoughts and feelings will remain unmetabolized. Powerful, unprocessed Beta elements will wreak havoc. It is tempting instead to try blunting the anxiety with mood-altering drugs, distracting, escapist or even self-destructive behavior, or withdrawal from the challenging leadership role. Beta element not only remain in place—they are energized by the drugs and escape.

There is another way to frame what is occurring: the leader easily becomes a "burned out" victim as the holder of the anxiety. It is in the role of anxiety-holder that a leader is most in need of outside support and guidance – whether this comes from a caring life-partner, a leadership coach, or a skilled psychotherapist. Peter Armentrout was at risk of becoming one of these "burned out" leaders. In this condition, Peter might be inclined to do grave (perhaps unrecoverable) damage to an organization that he founded and now finds to be a burden. Catherine Townsend is helping him reduce or even transform this burden.

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