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Leading a Public University: Lessons Learned in Choosing the Possibility of Quantum Results rather than Incremental Improvement

Many of us as leaders, regardless of the industry or profession we represent, have identified opportunities we believe are not being taken advantage of by our organizations. We see opportunities to improve a service or product, develop new revenue sources, serve more people, or create a more productive climate for employees. Whether these opportunities evolve from changes in technology, world events, new research and data, or new perspectives, we see distinct possibilities. As we launch the requisite organizational changes to realize possibilities, frustration often ensues. We find ourselves making statements such as

- If only the culture were not so bureaucratic, we could establish a true customer service perspective.
- If only people were not so resistant to change, we could streamline the organization, refocus energies, apply strengths, and make the most of the opportunity.
- If only I could get some more money, I could take advantage of that technology or that global market.

If only *a*, then I could do *b* is common in leadership language and behaviors, and the "if only" experience is frustrating.

Hard work, discipline, and patience nevertheless can yield steady, linear, positive improvements, leaving the organization incrementally better. This often leaves us dissatisfied because we are not able to realize the possibility we envision for our particular industry and stakeholders. My belief is that a primary reason we fall short of realizing our goals is our reliance on Newtonian or Cartesian principles of organizational behavior; in fact, the world operates in accordance with quantum physics/quantum theories of organizational behavior (Wheatley 1999; Kilmann 2001).

At the University of Missouri–Kansas City, I set out to introduce quantum principles aimed at shifting the institution's culture into the domain of realizing possibili-

ties. The leadership principles presented here are those that, upon reflection, are proving vital to creating and sustaining a quantum organization producing quantum results.

My thesis is that the ability to seize opportunities and make significant, nonlinear quantum improvements—in order to realize the fullness of an individual and industry's possibilities—requires "quantum organizations." In such organizations, ones that reflect quantum theories of organizational behavior, mindful, self-aware people relate to each other, not in a defined, confining hierarchy, but in a self-organizing, boundary-crossing world to create possibilities (Kilmann 2001). Is there risk? Yes. But what else is worth doing?

Opportunities and Possibilities in the Public Higher Education Industry

As context for the leadership principles, I first identify some of the issues in my industry—public higher education—and then paint a picture of a quantum organization and culture.

Most leaders in public higher education agree on the following issues as some of the opportunities and possibilities, or as problems we are addressing inadequately. As leaders, our language about these is typically "if only *a*, then I could do *b*," with the *a* placing the blame with someone other than ourselves.

- Public higher education is supposed to serve mainstream America, yet, as tuition has escalated, fewer people

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representing mainstream America have access to it. As leaders, we say: If only the state would appropriate more money to us, we would not have to raise tuition and we could preserve access. The counterargument from the state legislature and much of our taxpayer base is this: If only the university would not waste so much on duplication of programs and so many faculty, but rather would provide integrated solutions, they could cut costs, reduce tuition, and increase access. They say the universities are just not accountable. In turn, we point to all we have done to cut costs.

• Universities have difficulty implementing degree programs that respond to the changing needs of society or to the evolution of the knowledge base. As leaders, we often say: If only the faculty were not so stuck in their departmental "boxes," we could implement a new program in x, y, or z. The faculty say: If only the administrators would give us more money, we could add new programs; we cannot give up those we have; they are essential.

• Mainstream America is increasingly diverse in its ethnic composition, yet public universities have had great difficulty reflecting that diversity in their student and employee populations. As leaders, we say: If only the high schools would produce qualified diverse graduates, we could reflect that diversity in our student body and faculty. The high schools say: If only we had diversity in the ranks of the teachers produced by the universities, we could educate the diverse populations.

• Universities use the term "academic excellence" for everything. Every university says its goal is academic excellence in every field, and most of us pretend we can actually achieve that. Leaders say: If only the faculty would be willing to make the hard decisions, we could focus our resources and be excellent. Faculty say: What criteria are the administration using? If only they would look at my program the way I do, they would see it is an excellent program.

• University budgeting processes tend to be separate from priorities and opaque to stakeholders. As leaders, we say: If only people understood the budget; if only people would decide on priorities; if only I could understand the budget; if only those budget people were not so controlling; if only we had more money. Faculty and staff believe administrators have money hidden away, use money to pad their own interests, or are incompetent in generating new revenues.

Opportunities for the University of Missouri–Kansas City

The fact that the University of Missouri–Kansas City (UMKC) is in a city is a vital defining feature. In my view, quantum opportunities for universities exist especially in cities. And, because of its unusual profile, UMKC has some special opportunities.

UMKC is a public university with 10 academic units, including seven professional schools and the Conservatory of Music. Of its 14,000 students, 42 percent are graduate and professional students and 58 percent are undergraduates. The breadth of life and health sciences programs, including schools of medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, nursing and biological sciences, is similar to only 1 percent of universities in the United States. In short, the strength of the university lies in its professional schools, health sciences, and the performing arts. What better profile for a university in a city with a mainstream population needing an education, a city needing a professional workforce for economic growth, and a city that has chosen to become a life sciences research center and is investing in that choice?

In 2000, when I introduced quantum principles, UMKC was known as a solid, well-performing institution with quality faculty and students. I frequently heard, "UMKC has so much to offer and has just never reached its potential." Kansas City had announced its focus on the life sciences, and the city's political and industry leaders knew it needed a powerful university. That combination occurred to me as a powerful and exciting possibility for a public university. I knew that traditional strategic planning processes would produce only incremental improvement; why would we do the same thing and expect different results? I needed to produce quantum results; I believed the industry of higher education was ready and that UMKC was positioned to do it.

I expressed this intention in my inaugural address in September 2000: "These times call for new standards for higher education. We accept the fact that the measures of success are changing; the old criteria will not sustain us. A few universities will have the courage to respond to the time. UMKC will be one of those."

Theory: Newtonian/Cartesian versus Quantum Organizations

What we needed was a quantum organization capable of quantum results. In contrast, most organizations are Newtonian or Cartesian, set up to improve in an incremental, linear fashion (table 1).

While generally unstated, the following are four assumptions from the Newtonian/Cartesian world view that guide

Table 1	Characteristics of Organizations	
Newtonian/Cartesian	**Quantum**
Determinate	Unpredictable
Atomistic	Holistic
Hierarchical	Relational
Reductionist	Emergent

most organizations and most leaders. The problem is that all four assumptions are flawed because we now know the physical world—and probably the human and organizational world—actually function in accordance with quantum principles.

Flawed assumption #1: The world is predictable.

If you can amass enough information, if you can get the organizational chart right and optimize policies and procedures, there will be no surprises and you will be in control.

Unfortunately, the world is not predictable, no matter how much information you gather. And no matter how much you tweak them, organizational charts, policies, and procedures will never be just right when the inevitable unforeseen event occurs. Leadership that is the foundation for quantum results is leadership that expects unpredictability, seeing it as an opportunity and fertile ground for bold action.

Flawed assumption #2: All good ideas originate in the appropriate box on the organizational chart.

For example, if there is a financial problem, the solution will come from a person in the finance organization. If there is a personnel issue, the discussion to resolve it should include only those people in human resources. And so on.

These arbitrary boundaries do not exist in the real world. We all know that ideas and solutions exist across and up and down the organization. In fact, every organization has a collective wisdom, but in most organizations, ideas do not have a way to go anywhere. Ideas are stuck—and therefore useless to leaders and the organization. Leadership that is the foundation for quantum results is leadership that sets up the culture to access ideas and, in so doing, accesses the energy of the collective.

Flawed assumption #3: The organization is made up of separate parts, the only useful human interactions being those that follow the recognized chain of command.

The information you get from your supervisor and the relationships you have with your unit coworkers are all you need to get things done in this organization.

Everyone knows, or should know, that personal relationships trump official lines of authority. The real world of organizations is full of entangled and complex human relationships. Why not recognize and celebrate that reality? Leadership that lays the foundation for quantum results is leadership that turns entangled and complex relationships into a powerful asset—and relegates the rigidity and slow-motion speed of organizational charts, policies, and procedures to secondary status.

Flawed assumption #4: Issues have solutions that are either right or wrong.

The real world is not nearly so simple or so tidy. If an issue appears to have crystal-clear right and wrong answers, you probably have not examined it thoroughly. Leadership that lays the foundation for quantum results is leadership that sees the gray and says, "maybe we are not asking the right questions; maybe we are not engaging the question in its context; maybe we should re-frame the question." In quantum organizations, and in reality, solutions are "both/and."

Leadership Principles

These 10 leadership principles, identified now as I reflect over the last four years, are what I believe are vital to producing a quantum organization capable of quantum results. They are vital to producing an organization that celebrates unpredictability, consciously takes advantage of the power of relationships, searches for solutions that make the whole more than the sum of the parts, and allows for emergent solutions from across the institution.

1. **Make certain your constituents—those you are serving—are expressed in the vision statement for the organization.**
   Little will unfold relative to your constituents if their importance is not expressed powerfully in the vision for the institution. The vision statement inspires people and causes them to feel they are part of something bigger than themselves. UMKC's vision reads, "A community of learners making the world a better place." Our constituents are in our vision in the word *community*, and the phrase *making the world a better place* incites the self-awareness in our work.

2. **Make certain a critical mass of employees "owns" the vision statement.**
   Cultural change, by definition, is a grassroots process and nearly impossible to achieve in a traditional, hierarchical organization. Developing our vision at UMKC was not a consensus-building process; rather, we referred to it as a process that built toward alignment. The highly engaged, somewhat chaotic, and creative planning process took 18 months, after which time the vision emerged and people aligned because they had explored for themselves what might be possible in their work in the context of that vision. They chose to own the vision.

3. **As the leader, take a stand for the vision over and over and over (and over) again.**
   Any change requires the leader to talk about the vision all the time, every day in every meeting and in every set of remarks. You also must make decisions from that vision, always using it as the context for the decision, and make clear to others in your communications the relationship of the decision to the vision. Your actions show others how to lead from the vision and how to take a stand for it.

4. **Make certain that values matter.**

   While the vision inspires people to create and to act in a particular context, values are as important in showing them how to do that. As leaders, rarely are we able to bring values alive in a public institution. Of our five core values at UMKC, the one that has proven most powerful is "open and candid communication." Living that value allows us to discuss difficult issues and to provide feedback inside of our shared commitment.

5. **Use values to engage and create possibilities, not to judge.**

   A university's values come to life in conversations. As leaders, our role is to engage in conversations about what might be possible if, for example, we redesigned a procedure in accordance with the values. In those conversations, the values produce remarkable outcomes and changes. Values can be a negative influence when they are used to judge others. We get into trouble with values when we judge someone's behavior as inconsistent with the values and then judge their ideas as invalid.

6. **Develop a leadership team that is committed to the vision and manages to the vision.**

   Success, defined as outcomes, depends on a top leadership team that is genuine and transparent in its commitment to the vision. I discovered that when a vision speaks powerfully, it causes incredible leaders to show up. They are drawn to the organization to be a part of the vision and culture. Others may not be interested and may choose to leave.

7. **Create opportunities and a culture for others to fulfill the vision.**

   I use the word "fulfill" purposefully because the vision is not prescriptive. Rather, the vision defines a giant sphere that needs to be filled up with initiatives and accomplishments originating from all parts of the organization. The role of leaders is to create opportunities for others to fulfill the vision by creating a clearing for ideas to show up. You create a clearing by listening in a way that brings out the best in people, learning who they are, what they are capable of, and why they have chosen to be in your organization. If you frame the conversations about your vision in the context of who people are, they will show up and take action to fulfill that vision.

8. **Produce some early results that demonstrate the organization's potential for quantum results.**

   Results, produced early in a process and ones that demonstrate the vision, are essential. Alignment around a vision and values requires at least a year or more in a large organization. Yet, credibility and momentum depend on early results that demonstrate the rhetoric about the vision. At UMKC, we identified 12 break-

through projects in which to produce early results. Those projects defined a gap for UMKC—the distance between where we were and what we envisioned—and produced early results that filled the gap, demonstrating the ability to succeed at higher levels.

9. **Align management practices with the vision and management behaviors with the values.**

   As leaders, recognize that management practices and behaviors must extend from and always return to the vision and values. Budgeting, planning, compensation guidelines, procurement, and the many other administrative and human resources processes that exist in an organization eventually must undergo scrutiny framed by the context of the vision and values. At UMKC, we have only begun to examine management practices in the domain of what might be possible. One example, though, that I provide is the institution's collective response to recession-driven budget cuts by the state of Missouri (see examples).

10. **Lead from a place of self-knowledge—"Know thyself."**

    Only if you know yourself (who you are and what you are up to with your life) can you stay the course through the challenges and breakdowns that are inevitable. Change does not come easily. It is not a choice that should be made lightly or without commitment to a long period of unrelenting focus and plain hard work. However, there is also a shared exhilaration and enormous organizational pride in achieving quantum results and turning performance breakdowns into breakthroughs.

Responding to Opportunities: Leadership Principles in Action for Quantum Results

Four strands of change must unfold early and simultaneously if a quantum organization is to emerge from planning: a vision that states what the institution is doing for its constituency and that is widely owned by employees; values that engage possibilities in how the institution does things; early results that demonstrate performance at levels not previously seen; and alignment of management practices and policies with the vision and values. Three examples of projects manifesting one or more of these strands follow. Each example demonstrates UMKC's responses to one or more of the pressing issues for higher education. Finally, the examples, as they unfolded at UMKC, demonstrate one or more of the leadership principles.

Developing a Vision

Like many organizations, UMKC had engaged in a traditional strategic planning process, most recently in the mid-1990s, with many faculty and staff involved in conversations over a two-year period that resulted in a written

plan for 1995–2000. While many on campus knew of the strategic plan document, it was not a living plan—one that guided decisions, framed the context for community partnerships, caused policies to change, or inspired employee performance for success. A solid document reflecting incremental improvement was the expected outcome from that planning process.

I believed deeply that the industry of public higher education yearned for more—for a vision, a culture, and leadership willing to address the issues listed earlier, for the courage to say that it is time for public research universities to create new standards and hold themselves accountable to those standards. Thus, in the summer of 2000 we engaged quantum principles in planning. A group of 80 campus volunteers (administrators, faculty, staff, and students) began exploratory discussions on what was possible for UMKC in the context of its constituency and in the context of the opportunities afforded by the twenty-first century. This group developed a draft and shared it in dialogue sessions across campus and with external constituents. In retrospect, these dialogue sessions, more than any other part of the process, were responsible for producing genuine ownership of the vision by a critical mass of employees. The sessions were conduced by the "group of 80" in the spirit of dialogue as defined by Bohm (1996) and developed by Senge (1990), a process of face-to-face communications in which assumptions are suspended and common meaning is possible. A vision statement emerged through those conversations—a statement that also engaged community leaders and partners and motivated students. By involving the community, UMKC began the process of becoming a desirable partner in the priorities of the city of Kansas City and the state of Missouri.

As it emerged, I knew the importance of taking a stand for the vision over and over (and over) again. However, I had no idea how challenging that would be. Old language, behaviors, formats for university events, publications, policies, procedures, and traditions engaged the old vision and culture at every moment—all the time—pulling the organization back to the old. Even the most committed and aligned leaders had trouble seeing and responding to the pull at first. For me, for two years it felt like pushing uphill against an avalanche. Today, three years later, I believe we are nearing the point where we will begin riding the force of that avalanche downhill on a new side of the mountain.

Diversity in Action

The Diversity in Action project is an example of using values to engage possibilities and an example of a project aimed at producing early results related to one of those key issues for our industry. The group of people that proposed the project was the same group that designed and launched it. From the beginning, they saw it as a project that could create new standards for our industry. As I now see it, I believe it creates new standards for nearly every industry.

Typical of most organizations, diversity at UMKC was equated with minority populations—ethnic minorities, racial minorities, persons with physical disabilities, and persons with minority sexual preferences. Thus, the original planning team, which included volunteers representing all of these populations, had in common only the perception and realities that their views and life experiences were not valued, respected, or understood by the majority. Over many months, characterized by breakdowns internally in the team and between the team and the majority, a powerful (and in my view standard setting) statement of intention emerged: "At UMKC we create a positive environment by recognizing and acknowledging personal biases and being responsible for positive change." All of a sudden, diversity meant that everyone has biases and must be responsible for them. This was a breakthrough.

The project's initiatives today include training programs to raise awareness of individual biases; diversity infusion in the academic curriculum; incentive programs for faculty who add a diversity component to courses; report cards on employee diversity by position and unit; and enrollment management plans that are inclusive. To date, a Diversity in Action office now exists, 750 people have participated or signed up to participate in the diversity empowerment program (including all of the 40 members of my cabinet), 10 faculty members are working in partnership with the diversity office to revise their curriculum, and minority student enrollment is increasing.

The success is primarily a function of the commitment of the individuals who designed the project to the university's new vision and values and to the leadership development opportunities provided to them by those of us at higher levels of the university administration.

The Budget

The budget project is an example of using values to design possibilities, of addressing one of the major issues for our industry, and of aligning management practices with the university's vision. Like many universities, the budget process at UMKC had the following characteristics: sources and expenditures of money were understood only by a handful of people, and even fewer understood the decision processes that led to those expenditures; everything about the budget was opaque, resulting in little trust and the assumption the administration was hiding money; units accessed new resources mostly by making special deals with the provost or chancellor. Many off-budget promises had been made and financed without specific or appropriate revenue sources to pay for them. A "position control" system existed, requiring that all unused salary resources be

returned to central administration at the end of each fiscal year. And, budget allocations to units had little relationship to campus priorities. Thus, it came as no surprise when the budget process, like the Diversity in Action project, was selected to produce early, breakthrough results, demonstrating a new vision and values.

The Budgeting for Excellence team designed a process aimed at aligning money with priorities and producing a culture in which decisions, problems, mistakes, issues, and dilemmas were all discussed openly. As the leader, I had access to all budget information, and I had the power to cause the budget office to make my requests for information a top priority. Nevertheless, the process of unraveling the budget was an enormous challenge. Much had been promised without a source of revenue, not unusual but not reflective of accountability or open communications as values. And making matters more difficult, we had to fix it during a three-year recession when state budget allocations were declining dramatically. In retrospect, the most effective steps we took to work our way out of the morass included shared decision making with the 40 cabinet members and campuswide budget dialogues, which used direct and candid communications to describe the budget issues and to respond to questions about the budget process. We are not finished making the transition to a responsibility-centered budget approach with authority and responsibility located in the same place. We are two years into what we believe is a four- or five-year process.

I can say unequivocally that, had we stayed with a traditional, hierarchical, incremental approach to leading the organization and encountered the unplanned budget reversals that occurred over the past three years, we could not have stayed focused on our vision. We would have succumbed to the avalanche pulling us back to the old. Instead, we did stay the course, moving toward our goals. Most importantly for the long term, we developed a sense of trust (if not always agreement) about budget decisions. As we emerge from the recession and regain some new dollars at the margin, we are positioned to make decisions that leverage quantum performance.

Conclusion

In summary, my deepest commitment as a leader is to produce a climate—a work environment—that allows the collective wisdom of others to emerge and move to bold action throughout the organization. In the instances where we have fallen short, I have missed the mark by not ensuring we operated consistently with one or more of these leadership principles. Conversely, where we produced a significant, quantum result, the leadership team was thoroughly engaged with these principles. We have not completed our transition, and many complex challenges remain. Some would say that the jury is still out.

At their roots, organizations—from the largest governmental complex to an institution of higher education—are more than policies, procedures, organization charts, and business-driven bottom lines. If you want bold action, there must be more. Quantum results cannot be produced unless quantum principles are embraced; in those principles lay the foundation for unleashing the human spirit and human creativity.

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