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November 15, 2011

To OSR Alumni--

Greetings, friends and colleagues. At Colleen Ponto's request, I put together a preview of what's on the way in the new PW. As many of you know, I have since the 1980's been a frequent visitor to OSR. Over the years we have explored many of these themes. I hope this preface will stimulate you to find your own story in the new edition, and to contribute your experience on the reader's web site coming soon.

I also hope to meet some of you, perhaps for the second time, in January!

--Marv Weisbord

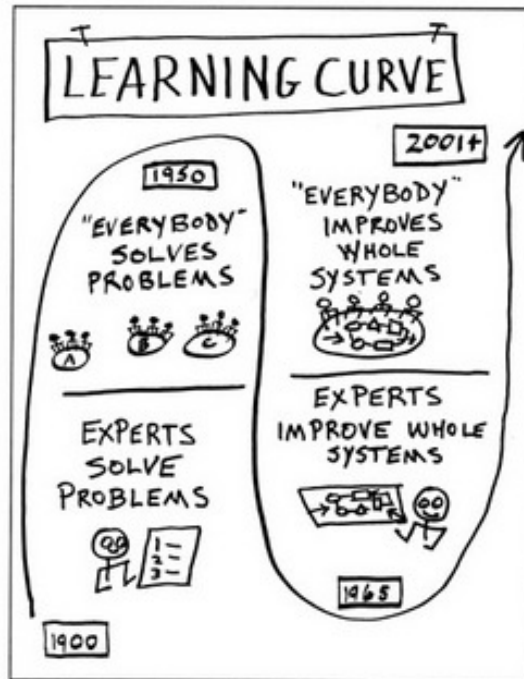
## **PREFACE: WELCOME TO PRODUCTIVE WORKPLACES, 25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION**

**T**his is a book about people who have sought for 150 years to improve life at work. For the last fifty, that has included me. Starting as a manager in 1959, I spent a decade in business, more than twenty years as a consultant, and from the early 1990s have co-directed a global nonprofit. I spent several months refining this new edition. I especially sought to highlight the influence of the past on today's paradoxes. Although the world has changed exponentially since I first wrote PW, my key themes endure like granite. So do principles of productivity, even when confounded by technologies I could not imagine a quarter century ago.

In 1985, I sent an early draft of this book to Eric Trist, a key figure in my story. A few weeks later I flew to Florida, where he was retired, to review with him several cases in which I discerned an emerging new way to improve workplaces. Eric asked a few questions, then replied with a phrase I had never heard. "What you need," he said, "is a 'conceptual emboldening.'" That startled me. I had not known such an act was possible. I soon understood that he was asking me what conclusions I could draw from my cases. On a piece of scratch paper I sketched what I had lived through in my work during the previous quarter century. Such was the origin of "The Learning Curve" that ties together the chapters of this book.

I will tell you in the pages that follow how experts solving problems morphed into everybody improving whole systems. You can see that these strategies are not mutually exclusive. Maybe you know them all. Indeed, what led me to this edition was that so many people had moved since 1987 toward "everybody improving whole systems." To my handful of past cases, I have the good fortune to bring you forty more examples from colleagues

around the world who replicated my experience and added wrinkles of their own.



Thus, I am able to tell this story anew. While the four learning curve strategies co-exist, if you aspire to dignity, meaning and community, you won't be satisfied until you get everybody improving the whole. Not if you seek the economic benefits from ever-changing technologies. If you have read a past edition, you will find the original shortened, sharpened, and expanded. If you are reading this for the first time, you too may identify with some of the characters you will meet and place yourself in this never ending story.

***The Times Keep on Changing.*** When I started managing in 1959, nobody had cell phones, pagers, fax machines, personal computers, CDs, DVDs, PDAs, Google, or Wikipedia. The now obsolete Sony Walkman would not be invented for twenty years. My “personal digital assistant” was a little black book in which I wrote dates in pencil because they were sure to change. Blackberries were something you put on pancakes. To research a topic, I went to the library, looked up sources in a card catalogue, and made notes on 5-by-8-inch index cards. I wrote whole books on a typewriter. I backed up with carbon paper, something you may never have seen. I thanked my stars for these efficient technologies, wondering how Charles Dickens found time to write thousands of pages by hand.

I began a love/hate affair with computers in 1961. My company became one of its industry's earliest users, and I met my first expert systems improver who told me of a customer glitch I wanted to solve, “You can't do that. The program won't allow it.” For decades I've been an early adopter, down to the iPad that contains drafts of this book. Without the Internet I could not have updated it. I have seen many life-changing technologies come and go—the linotype, monotype, key punches/verifiers, mimeograph machines, word processors, dot matrix printers, Polaroid cameras, and vinyl records. If you think Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon are the last word today, just wait until tomorrow. The thing to remember is that technology, like money, doesn't care what you do with it. Make life better, fritter it away. Your smart phone

couldn't care less.

So, while I have a lot to tell you about effective human interaction, I have little to say about online conferencing, social networking, and technologies not yet invented. Fortunately, so many media cover those topics you are unlikely to miss them here. I believe you can apply the principles I advocate anywhere, including on the Internet. Until the day you can access a website and get back all that you would want from face-to-face meetings, what I shall tell you is worth pondering. Task-focused work has little in common with social networking. If your success requires collaborating with others, you'll still long at times to meet them up close and personal.

That life is speeding up is not a new observation. In the 1960s Eric Trist and his collaborator Fred Emery wrote a ground-breaking paper describing how outside events impacted organizations in ways that they could neither control nor ignore. Emery and Trist (1964) were the first to identify greater environmental uncertainty and interdependence among systems as conditions calling for responses few people knew how to make. What none of us appreciated in those years was that the *velocity* of change was accelerating at warp speed. The pace was outstripping our methods.

When I started consulting in 1969, business schools taught that big companies reorganized every seven years. They centralized in one cycle and decentralized in the next. For consulting firms this was a windfall. You took nine months to interview, diagnose, and write a report recommending to the client the structure they did not have, eighteen months to implement it, and had four plus years of stability before doing it again. The seven-year cycle became five years in the early 1970s, then three years, and by the 1980s reorganizations were as predictable as the seasons. Mergers, acquisitions, downsizings, globalizings, right-sizings. People were changing organization charts faster than they could photocopy them.

When I left the consulting business in 1992, the cycle was more like seven weeks. By the time you wrote a report, the scenario had changed. Companies and communities also were diversifying. Over the next twenty years I found myself helping people do strategic planning in many of the world's cultures. The meetings I ran grew more diverse with multiple ethnic groups speaking a Babel of languages, thrown together only by the task at hand, for example, improving economic conditions, extending health care, marketing new technologies, or reducing the risk of natural disasters. But what became of the stable old cultures that needed a jolt to unfreeze, move, and refreeze at some elusive higher level of functioning? One day I woke up and noticed I had restocked my tool kit.

I had worked by then in all kinds of systems with all sizes of groups. By the late 1980s I was certain my clients were infinitely more satisfied to the extent they could involve everyone in improving the whole. We are still learning how to do that. It takes everybody to maintain a satisfying equilibrium among economics, technology, and people. That, however, is only half the story. To sum up the rest of it, I paraphrase a wise teacher of traditional Chinese medicine, Dianne Connelly, to point out that this quest, online or off, will never be "a one-walk dog."