

# 9 Communication in the Empowering Organization

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In this ethnographic account, the concept of an empowering organization is developed through a description of the practices that distribute power and opportunity, provide open communication, integrative problem solving, and an environment of trust, and encourage high performance and self-responsibility. Returning to theory, the "rules of empowerment" are provided.

## ON BEING A GOOD LATTICE PLAYER

At the end of May, at the end of my nine-month sabbatical, I was given a send-off farewell party in the main conference room of the Paper Mill East facility of W. L. Gore & Associates. The party included those associates, as they are always called at Gore, with whom I had the good fortune to work during my stay. There was coffee and punch. There was picture taking. And there were presents—one gray Gore-Tex® gym bag from the Paper Mill East corporate staff, and one black Gore-Tex® gym bag from the personnel associates from the various plants, an unplanned duplication of effort that caused some mild embarrassment until I commented that this resulted from the relatively unrestrained initiative typical of the Gore way of doing things that might be seen as a weakness to some, but was in fact a strength, as witnessed by the fact that I was walking away with *at least one* Gore-Tex® gym bag. (I had also been given a number of W. L. Gore & Associates pins, hats, and paraphernalia, so much so that decked out in all of them with the two gym bags hoisted up on my shoulders, someone was able to crack, "Looks like you've been to a sales convention.") And there was a cake.

In the upper-right-hand third of the cake, in brown icing, were evenly spaced horizontal and vertical lines that represented the crosshatching of a

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lattice. Written in red icing were the words, "To Mike, A Good Lattice Player," a commendation of which I was proud.

W. L. Gore & Associates is a 28-year-old entrepreneurial dream founded by W. L. "Bill" Gore to exploit the properties of Teflon as an insulator for electronic wire. With the invention of Gore-Tex®—an expanded form of Teflon—in 1969 by his son Bob, W. L. Gore & Associates began diversifying its product lines into areas more familiar to more Americans. Vascular grafts made from Gore-Tex® have been used in over a million operations and have an unparalleled reputation in the medical community. And Gore-Tex® fabrics—used in everything from ski gloves to running suits to fashion boots to, yes, gym bags—have become popular items among both yuppies and those die-hard enthusiasts who require high-performance clothing and equipment.

But another "product," if you will, of W. L. Gore & Associates that is becoming more and more well known is the very organizational structure of the company itself. Dubbed by Bill Gore as "the lattice organization," the rather unique organizing characteristics of W. L. Gore & Associates has earned the company much coverage in local newspapers, a cover story in *Inc.*, a magazine for entrepreneurs, a spot in the *Wall Street Journal's* weekly TV show, and coverage in *The New York Times Magazine*. W. L. Gore & Associates is listed in *The 100 Best Companies in America to Work For* (Levering, Moskowitz, & Katz, 1985), being in the top ten in terms of opportunity (making the high-tech Silicon Valley outfits seem like Marine boot camp, according to the book). In Tom Peters's new book, *Passion for Excellence* (Peters & Austin, 1985), W. L. Gore & Associates is highlighted as one of four organizational "gems" that Peters has uncovered. Perhaps 'most impressive, in John Naisbett's *Reinventing the Corporation* (Naisbett & Auberdeno, 1985), Gore & Associates is introduced on the first page as the American corporation that has already gone the furthest toward "reinventing" what organizational life can be.

The "lattice organization" is a graphic descriptor much in use at Gore that permits and invites frequent contrasts to the traditional "pyramidal" organization. Where traditional organizations are organized pyramidally, with discrete lines of communication and authority moving upward and downward through a system broad at the base and narrow at the top, the lattice organization *looks like* a lattice, a regular crosshatching of lines, representing an unrestricted flow of communication with no overlap of lines of authority. As Bill Gore defines it, a lattice organization means "one-on-one communication" with whomever you need to talk to in order to get a job done, no fixed or assigned authority but leadership that evolves over time and that fluctuates with the specific problem at hand that most need attention, and tasks and functions that are organized through personally made commitments—not through job descriptions and organization charts.

There are numerous other buzzwords and catch phrases that characterize the Gore culture. The company objective (singular) is "to make money and have fun." Associates are guided by

The Four Principles: *Fairness*—Each of us will *try* to be fair in all our dealings. . . . *Freedom*—Each of us will allow, help, and encourage [other] Associates to grow in knowledge, skill, the scope of responsibility, and the range of activities. *Authority* . . . is not a power of command, only of leadership. *Commitment*—Each of us will make [our] own commitments—and keep them. *Waterline*—Each of us will consult with appropriate Associates who will share the responsibility of taking any action that has the potential of serious harm to the reputation, success, or survival of the Enterprise. The analogy is that our Enterprise is like a ship that we are all in together. Boring holes above the waterline is not serious, but below the waterline, holes could sink us.

At Gore, there are leaders and sponsors, not bosses, and the distinction is more than mere terminology. The uniqueness of the culture makes many associates feel that they work in a special place, and the practice of the culture has the effect of freeing up power, communication, and conceptions of organizational life. The result for many associates, as my own experience would confirm, was high morale, high initiative, responsible risk taking, and the ability to delight in getting things done. There was a decided change that came from being "a good lattice player."

In my own case, over the previous several years, I had been very interested in the notion of "corporate cultures" and especially in the ways that corporate cultures were made manifest in the everyday interactions between people (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982, 1983). Although we academic beagles on the trail of "corporate culture" were pointing to the rituals, oft-told stories, key symbols, and so on as the indicators of the cultural beliefs and values of organizations, we all knew that these highly visible cultural forms were just the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. The real weight of the culture lay in the less visible cultural forms—in the mundane ways people went about their everyday organizational activities. Besides, rituals, oft-told stories, and key symbols were largely under the control of management, and the interpretation a grunt on the loading dock might give of a story, say, might be very different from the one management might intend. So if I wanted to come to a richer understanding of a "corporate culture," I was going to have to do more than interview management on its stories and rituals. I was going to have to spend some time getting a view of everyday activities.

So I went to work at W. L. Gore & Associates. I got in because my brother was a trusted associate of seven years' tenure, and in a company like Gore, who knows you and who will vouch for you is of extreme importance. (Family ties were common at Gore. Bill Gore told me that as many as 55% of the associates in the Delaware-Maryland area were related to one another.) I also got in because W. L. Gore & Associates had in the previous three years tripled in growth, going from about 1500 associates to 4500 associates. It was easy for them to see that they had, if not outright problems, at least opportunities for improving their communication practices.

I had had several previous "nonparticipant observer" research projects under my belt, and my previous working experiences were with a very

bureaucratized aerospace company and with several universities—none of which provided familiar ground to what I came to experience at Gore. For the first four months, I wandered around in good researcher style, taking notes, asking questions, reading memos, newspaper clippings, and so on. Occasionally someone would invite me to a meeting and near the meeting's close would ask me, expectantly, "Well, how are we communicating?" I'd say what I thought, but would seldom give any feedback that would be specific enough that anybody could do anything different for having heard it.

And then somewhere in January, it all changed because problems had come up. Because Gore employees are known as associates the company's employee stock ownership program is called the Associate Stock Ownership Plan (ASOP). It is essentially the Gore retirement program, with the company annually contributing 15% of each associate's salary to the purchase of Gore stock. Back in December, the ASOP committee had made a change in the operating practice of the ASOP, and announced the change by memo. In an extraordinarily oral culture like Gore's, memos are seen to be either absolutely insignificant or enormously significant; the ASOP memo took on the latter image. The concern and confusion over the change in ASOP was coupled with some long-simmering concerns and confusions over just what the AS OP was. In Gore-like fashion, an ad hoc task force was put together to do a better job of communicating about ASOP. I was invited to be part of that task force.

At the first meeting of the task force, the proposal that seemed straightforward to most was that some of the members of the task force should get together with the ASOP committee to find out exactly what the ASOP committee wanted communicated; then the task force would go about preparing communications in various media to get the word out. Someone asked me what I thought. I said I thought that instead of asking the AS OP committee what it wanted to communicate, the task force ought to talk to associates first, to find out what they wanted to know. It was a simple enough idea, and the logic of it appealed immediately to all the members of the task force. Right then and there, the task force laid out a plan to hold several different focus group interviews with new associates, associates who had been around a while, and associates about to retire. It took about two weeks to get the focus groups together, gather up their questions, and then go to the ASOP committee. I had given some feedback that someone could act on.

From that first task force meeting until the end of my sabbatical, I enjoyed the role of participant observer. I worked with another task force to develop an orientation program at Gore in which we were trying to help new associates understand some of the subtleties of the Gore culture. We labored over an outline that was supposed to be the basis for a two-hour session. I ran the outline past Bill Gore, who looked at it and said, "I don't think you need any more input or revisions. You need to try it." We did; it didn't work—too long, and parts of it were too sophisticated for brand new associates. So the task force, without needing to consult with anyone else about it, decided to split the orientation program into two: One two-hour session for new associates to

familiarize them with the Gore business and just the basics of the culture, and a second two-hour session designed for associates who had been around three to six months and for whom the more in-depth treatment of the culture was relevant and welcomed.

My efforts did not always lead to visible accomplishments, however. In my wandering-around phase, I spent some time with some of the leaders of the electronic products business. I learned a lot about how this very successful Gore business operated—especially how they epitomized team decision making in an environment of challenge and trust. I tried to take some of their wisdom and transport it to another division that was less successful and that was characterized by a lack of team decision making. In this attempt, I was not very successful, and although I was personally a bit humbled by my lack of impact, I believe most associates approved of my having at least tried. (This division now, thanks largely to some personnel changes of late, has come to embody much more of the team decision-making model.)

But probably the most rewarding experience for me came right at the very end of my sabbatical. Bob Gore had asked me to do a talk on communication and culture at Gore, and I had agreed. Having spent most of my time up until then with project leaders and marketing leaders, I decided I needed some other perspectives—from manufacturing operators and shop associates, as well as engineers and secretaries and sales associates. So I held my own focus groups, asking just two questions: What do you think of communication at Gore? and, What do you think of the Gore culture? I held 18 focus group interviews in nine plants. I gathered up my information, organized it, and reported it to a meeting of the business leaders and to the associates who had been in any of the focus groups.

The results of the focus groups showed that the associates really liked the way communication and culture were supposed to work at Gore and that most of them felt good about the way communication happened and the culture was practiced. But there was room for improvement. The associates in the focus groups gave me many examples of problems. I presented both the basic positive feelings, and the areas that needed improvement, and made some suggestions for change.

I was struck by the overall response of the business leaders. They listened intently. There was no defensiveness. As one of them said, "I've heard nearly everything you've said at least once before. But you've put it all together in one place for us, organized it, and laid it out in a way that we can't ignore." Someone else asked, "What are we going to do?" and then someone else said, not in a dismissive way, "I don't know that we have enough information, or the right kind of information, to do anything." The meeting broke up.

I returned to my office, and thought about the problem. Gore was a high-tech organization that made much of engineering precision. My anecdotes from focus group interviews lacked precision. How strong were the positive feelings, really? How extensive were the problems, really? More important, Gore was a highly decentralized organization, and unless I could

provide decentralized information to the specific people who could do something about it, I couldn't have provided feedback that somebody could act on.

So I drafted a questionnaire. (Believe me, given my recent proselytizing for qualitative methods, I recognize the irony of this.) I showed it to my sponsor, who suggested I show it to Bob Gore, who suggested I show it to three or four other associates. I then enlisted the help of the personnel associates in each plant to administer the questionnaire. An associate in data processing helped with data analysis. Three weeks to the day after I had drafted the questionnaire, it had been approved and distributed to 1200 associates in 9 plants, the data had been analyzed, and the results had been reported to business leadership, who agreed to pass the results along to all associates in their plants. Results were broken down by plant and by work area within each plant, all reported against organizationwide means. I had provided a lot of feedback that could be acted on, and I had done it by being "a good lattice player."

#### GORE—THE CHARTER AND THE CULTURE

It seems to me that there is a useful distinction to be made between an organization's charter and an organization's culture. The charter is the *explicit*, organizationally sanctioned set of statements about a company, its vision of itself, what it does, why, and how. Hewlett-Packard's "HP way" is a classic example of an organizational charter. The culture of an organization is much broader than its charter; it is the totality of sense-making practices and resultant "sense made" of the organization. Ideally, the charter and the culture should be largely in sync with one another, although it is unreasonable to assume that organizational practices will never deviate from the charter. However, it is conceivable that an organization's charter could be very much out of sync with its culture, especially since having a "strong culture" (read: "strong charter") has recently become *de rigueur* for organizations. It is easy for organizations to hire a consultant and purchase a well-worded charter in today's enthusiasm for strong cultures.

W. L. Gore & Associates certainly has a well-developed and clearly articulated charter. Nearly every associate knows that the objective of the company is "to make money and have fun." Stories abound of Bill Gore walking into an associate's office at 4:30 and asking: "Did you have any fun today? Did you make any money today?" And the corporate objective is subject to both humor and criticism. I saw countless T-shirts, buttons, and posters that asked, "Are we having fun yet?" On the other hand, some associates object that "making money and having fun" doesn't seem businesslike enough. One influential associate told me, in utter disbelief, that someone had once seriously suggested that Gore buy the Chicago Cubs, because that would be a way to make money and have fun at the same time.

Even more well-known among the associates are the "Four Operating Principles—freedom, fairness, waterline, and commitment." There is rather constant disagreement about what these terms mean exactly, and whether or not specific situations manifest the practice of these principles. For one associate, an action becomes justifiable under the principle of "freedom." For another associate, that same action seems unjustifiable if it means not following through with a "commitment." For still another associate, the action may seem singularly irresponsible if the situation is clearly a "waterline" matter. For still another associate, regardless of how ill-advised the action may have been, the important question now is what will be a "fair" response.

For example, one associate may exercise his or her freedom to purchase a piece of equipment. Another associate may see that action as not following through on the team's commitment to try to control costs. Still another associate may agree that, for small purchases, individual responsibility is all that is called for, but in the case of this larger purchase, it is a waterline matter, and the entire team should have been consulted. Yet still another associate may agree that the purchase showed bad judgment, but the issue now is what response is fair to the offending associate *and* to the team.

In any case, all the discussion about what really constitutes "freedom" or "fairness" tends to keep the Four Principles alive, and the charter clearly sets an agenda for the practices of the culture.

Two other aspects of the Gore charter are important and universally known to associates: the lattice system of communication and the sponsor/ leader system of authority. The "lattice," as it is typically called, refers to the practice of one-on-one communication on an "as needed" basis to get the job done. Associates typically do not ask permission of anyone to go to talk to someone else. There are no proper "channels" one needs to go through.

Although the lattice theoretically means that everyone can be linked to everyone else in a plantwide communication matrix, such a ponderous "comcon" (completely connected communication network) does not in fact exist. Keeping one's commitments does not require everyone to talk to everyone else, and patterns of communication evolve over time to form a structured network. Still, the network evolves in response to functional requirements, not by hierarchical fiat.

The lattice is a powerful and many-edged tool that needs to be wielded carefully and responsibly. And just as the lattice makes it possible for the newest of associates to ask Bob Gore a question, if that is required, it also makes it possible for Bob Gore to go directly to the newest associate if that is required. In some cases, such an interchange is marked with some trepidation on the part of the new associate. Bob Gore or a business leader or whoever is likely to be communicating *to get the job done*, and not just to exchange pleasantries.

In many different ways, Gore backs up its lattice preaching with practice. First, Gore tries to keep plants small—ideally 150 associates per plant and no

more than 250—in order to give one-on-one communication a chance of being a reality. Second, Gore has invested in a mix of decentralized and centralized communication technologies—electronic voice mailboxes and plantwide paging systems—that make it easy for associates to contact one another. Through the voice mailbox system, a kind of interconnected set of answering machines, anyone can leave telephone messages directly with anyone else, without the need of intermediaries—typically secretaries—to type memos or take phone messages for someone who is out of the office. Through the plantwide paging systems, an associate in a plant can quickly locate another associate in the same plant or in another plant, even if that associate is not in his or her office. Third, it is a common leadership practice at Gore that should an associate go to his or her sponsor and mention a concern, question, complaint, suggestion, or piece of information relevant to another associate, the sponsor is most likely to say, "Have you brought that up with her [him] yet?" That is, the sponsor will encourage the associate to make the communication contact, rather than the sponsor becoming the intermediary between the two associates.

So strong is the value of one-on-one communication that many new start-up research projects look forward to getting big enough that they can move out of the established plants into isolated, cramped, and poorly furnished rental quarters where within-team communication is enhanced. In one particularly dedicated research team, the group got so large it outgrew its rental quarters and had to move into a newly built facility with magnificent front offices overlooking a pristine pine forest. The leaders of the team decided to forgo the windowed front offices for windowless offices in the interior of the plant so they could be closer to the manufacturing operators on the project.

An important consequence of the lattice—and particularly of the voice mailbox and paging systems—is that communication is not only direct, but rapid. For example, say three marketing associates in one plant are meeting and a question comes up about a manufacturing process. They call the process engineer on the phone. He is not in. They page him. He doesn't answer the page, but another associate does and reports that the process engineer has gone to a meeting in another plant. The marketing associates call there and put in a page. Soon, they reach the engineer, ask their question, and get back to their meeting. So heavily used is the paging system that the typical Gore plant has something of the quality of an airport—with the name of first this associate and then that being asked to punch a particular number on the nearest touch-tone phone. (Also like airports, the paging system quickly fades into background noise and is not particularly distracting; remarkably, however, associates are consistently able to pick out their own names from the background.)

Another example: A leader of a task force with representatives from six different plants needs to call a meeting. She accesses the voice mailbox system, suggests a Wednesday meeting, and sends the message to the six task force

members with a few touches of the button. Within a few hours, by the end of the day at the latest, she will know if her Wednesday meeting time will work for everyone or not. In my own experience at Gore (and I was spending my time on various projects involving nine plants), I was invited to many meetings, and seldom were they scheduled more than a week in advance. More likely, they'd be scheduled one or two days in advance at most.

The second important structural feature of the Gore charter is the sponsor/leader system of authority. Sponsors are supposed to help associates grow in responsibility, guide them in making sound decisions, help them get access to the resources that will make it possible for them to get the job done, hold them accountable to their commitments, and act as their advocates to others in the organization.

Where sponsorship is an associate-to-associate relationship, leadership is a functional relationship. On the basis of competence displayed and acknowledged over time, some associates will become known as leaders—manufacturing leaders, personnel leaders, data-processing leaders, plant or business leaders. Leaders are often sponsors, and sponsors are sometimes leaders, but there is no exact correspondence between the two. There is therefore no organizational chart at Gore, and to try to construct one on the basis of who sponsors or leads whom would lead to a most perplexing crosshatch of lines. Many associates are sponsored by the leaders of the area in which they work. However, many associates are also cosponsored by several sponsors. An associate in one functional area or in one project may be sponsored or cosponsored by an associate in another area or project. In rare cases (but it is often thought of as the ideal to which all sponsorship relationships should aspire), sponsorship is transitive—that associate A sponsors associate B and associate B sponsors associate A.

Where did the "lattice" and "sponsors/leaders" come from? Gore legend has it that back in his preentrepreneurial days when he worked for DuPont, Bill Gore was amazed by how motivated everyone was when they worked on task forces and how motivation and accomplishment dropped off as the task forces were disbanded and people moved back into their niches in the hierarchy. Supposedly, Bill noticed that even in the hierarchy, the real work got done through the informal channels between people and the informal influence among them, rather than through the formal channels of the chain of command. Bill's insight was, if the work gets done through the informal system anyway, then free up the informal system as much as possible by doing away with the formal system. Thus the lattice and sponsors and leaders.

It is admittedly easy to be skeptical about how all this works. Usually, there is a presumption that somebody somewhere has to be calling the shots—an executive who determines ultimately who is going to do what when. Bob Gore, who is president of the company, has enormous personal—not positional—authority within Gore. The inventor of Gore-Tex®, he is very bright and quick. He has that all-important commodity at Gore, "credibility." (At Gore, *credibility* refers to a constellation of attributes, including technical com-

petence, a track record of "good judgment," and a history of follow-through and accomplishment.) With his credibility and personal authority, Bob is able to influence, to a great extent, the directions the company moves in. Yet Bob is not so much an executive as he is a catalyst. I remember one important meeting that I attended that Bob led. The meeting lasted for four days. Most of the business leaders of the company attended. On the last day as the meeting was coming to a close, someone asked, "Well, what are we all supposed to do as a result of this meeting?" Bob quickly said, "I don't think we're *all* supposed to do any one thing. I know that I've come away from this meeting with three or four things I know I want to do, and I hope that everyone else has their own personal 'to dos' as well."

This notion of leadership as credible-catalyst-within-a-system-of-action, rather than leadership as hierarchical position, helps explain a number of things that happen at Gore that are absolutely contrary to what we would expect in a traditional company. For example, in a few plants, associates are allowed to choose their own sponsors, the presumption being that people will want to be sponsored by credible individuals who can best help them get their jobs done and succeed. One newly hired associate found himself in the unusual position after two weeks on the job of having his sponsor ask him to sponsor her! The sponsor could see that the new associate had some skills she lacked, and that he could help her get her job done more successfully than she was doing herself. Although associates are sometimes appointed by business leaders to be sponsors or leaders, more frequently associates evolve into these roles. It is not at all uncommon for an associate at Gore to say something like, "When did I become a sponsor? Well, officially it's been a year. But I was sort of sponsoring the people in my area for about a year before that, only I didn't realize it at first. Then some people asked me to be their sponsor, and it seemed like I was already doing it anyway, so it became official."

It is interesting that associates sometimes evolve out of positions of sponsorship and leadership. Again, it is not at all uncommon for an associate and a sponsor to agree that the sponsor relationship is not working out for either of them, and the associate goes off to seek another sponsor or another sponsor is recommended. Such a decision does not necessarily reflect badly on the associate or the sponsor. (However, if the associate can find no one who *wants* to sponsor him or her, that is a very bad sign.) Very infrequently, but it has happened, an entire team will decide it can no longer follow the team leader, and the team leader will be asked to look for a new set of commitments. Although at the time such a vote of no confidence is painful for all involved, Gore is not the kind of place that stigmatizes. Sometimes the associate who gets the vote of no confidence leaves Gore, but at other times such associates have quickly settled into new commitments where they can again make significant contributions. I will make one final observation here, although I will develop the point in greater detail later. This fluid authority structure that I've described might sound like a breeding ground for political gamesmanship of the highest order. I would claim, in fact, that Gore is a very political

organization—given a definition of politics as an arena that recognizes legitimate conflict and its subsequent resolution within a system of open discourse. However, Gore is decidedly not a breeding ground for gamesmanship. This fact speaks in part to the integrity and maturity of the overwhelming majority of associates who simply do not act in that way.

These features of the Gore charter—freedom, fairness, commitment, waterline, lattice, sponsors, and leaders—all have consequential impact on the Gore culture and subsequently on the associates' experience of working at Gore. But singly or even lumped together, they do not give a very good picture of what the total culture is like; they do not provide a gestalt of what the experience of working there is like. I have found that in trying to describe the Gore culture to outsiders curious about Gore, as well as to associates who are interested in an outsider's perspective, I have taken to using three metaphors (similes, actually) that try to capture the culture in a gestalt image: Gore as a cluster of peasant villages, Gore as a very large improvisational jazz group, and Gore as factions in colonial America.

### Gore as a Cluster of Peasant Villages

In its passion for decentralization, in its extraordinary orality, and in the way its communication patterns and leadership structures come into being through a process of evolution, Gore is like a cluster of peasant villages. In the eastern cluster (and here *cluster* is a Gore word), there are now 11 plants of between 100 and 250 associates all within a 15-mile radius of Newark, Delaware. In the Flagstaff cluster, there are six plants. Each plant has its own leadership, or village elders, and is remarkably independent of the other plants. Just as there is no formal communication channel within a peasant village, there is no formal communication channel within Gore. Still, patterns of communication evolve. Certain rituals pertain as to who should be brought in on what kinds of decisions and when. Gossip is important, even trusted if the source has credibility, and some associates play a crucial role in keeping the information flowing through the plant as they wander from area to area dropping this tidbit of news here, listening to that problem there. Occasionally, when there is an extremely important issue that needs to be aired, a mass meeting of all associates will be held, just as in the way that all the members of a village might be expected to turn out at the ringing of the church bell or some other such sign.

Leadership in the plants, like leadership in the village, tends to evolve. Sometimes it is because certain associates are particularly competent, sometimes because they are particularly credible, sometimes because they are particularly caring; whatever the reason, they find a following, and are brought in on major decisions. Their advice and blessings are sought.

Sometimes, when a plant is having problems it seems unable to solve on its own, Bob Gore will step in. In these cases, it is like the provincial governor appointing his own representative among the village elders. This move, of

course, is sometimes grounds for some squawking among some of the village elders, and is sometimes grounds for much gossip within the village, and even between villages. But the newly appointed typically is soon adopted by the rest of the village, especially if needed relief is brought to the village's problems, and the process of evolution takes over once more.

The plants all have an ambivalence about how they are supposed to feel about what's going on in other plants, just as one village would have an ambivalence about what was going on in other villages. Because so many associates have relatives working in other facilities, there are a lot of blood ties that bind plants together and serve as extraordinarily quick and effective informal communication links between plants. The spirit of decentralization tends to make each plant feel it should just mind its own business. But, then, there is so much available information about what's going on elsewhere in the cluster, that it's hard not to be concerned about or intrigued by the rumors, gossip, and stories that come from elsewhere. Also, there is great curiosity as to whether the practices in one plant are the same as or different from the practices in other plants. Villagers wonder what the customs are in the villages across the river.

Other than the informal bloodlines that pass information between plants, the main carriers of information from one plant to another are the few members of the corporate staff, who often seem much like traveling merchants, priests, and beggars. Also, representatives from each plant who are members of the same guild (personnel, data processing, accounting, etc.) typically get together on a monthly basis to compare notes. (When I presented this model of the Gore culture to one of the sales leaders, he admitted first having trouble getting past the "peasant" part of the metaphor, but once he did, he had a ball trying to decide who in each "village" played the part of the "village idiot.")

### Gore as a Large Improvisational Jazz Group

At one of the annual medical products sales meetings, one speaker was paying tribute to Bill Gore, saying that Gore was like one big symphony, and Bill was the orchestra conductor. My talk, scheduled next, was about the Gore culture as I saw it, and I began by saying that, without any disrespect meant toward Bill, I disagreed with the last characterization. Gore was hardly a symphony, I said, but was more like a 4500-member improvisational jazz group trying to make music in 25 different buildings at the same time. Each associate seemed busily engaged in making his or her own kind of music, hoping that he or she could find someone playing a compatible melody or rhythm. Once you found a fit, and once the music started getting good, you quickly found a whole lot of others joining in. Now this was not to say that, in each room, there wasn't a lot of counterpoint going on. There may even be occasions of dueling banjos. And there always seemed to be some lost souls wandering around playing out of sync with everyone else, but they were

surprisingly tolerated. Occasionally, everything would seem to break down, and there wasn't music anymore, but just chaos and noise. Then, in time, a line would rise out of the cacophony, and there would be music again.

The real trick, of course, was to get the people in all the different 25 rooms to be playing something roughly the same, and under the circumstances, rough approximations were all that anyone hoped for. Given even those expectations, it was surprising how well they were met.

I concluded by saying that if you liked to improvise and you could fit in with a bunch of musicians who basically found their way as they played, you'd like Gore. But if you were the type who wanted a symphony conductor with a written musical score, Gore wouldn't be the place for you. I could tell by the laughter that my metaphor had—so to speak—struck a chord with the audience.

### Gore as Factions in Colonial America

Not surprisingly, in a culture where freedom and independent thought are considered valuable, there is much variation in what associates think of the Gore charter. I imagine that there was great similarity in colonial America as the colonists contemplated independence from England. England represented the old ways, and America the new; just as, at Gore, other corporations represented the old ways, and Gore represented the new. Many comments about the Gore culture would be preceded with, "I worked for X company for 15 years before I came to Gore, and although this place isn't perfect, it sure is a hell of a lot better than what's been thought up before." A few associates, however, dispute the difference between Gore and elsewhere. (And there are even a few "Tories" who believe that Gore would be better off with a monarchy!)

But I think what is most similar to the colonial period is the attitudes and strengths of feelings that talk about what the Gore culture engenders. There is a sizable faction of Gore associates who, like a sizable faction of American colonists, believe that what this is all about is nothing short of the greatest experiment known to humankind—an experiment in freedom, equality, and other notable sentiments. There is again another sizable faction of Gore associates who, like a sizable faction of American colonists, are rather cynical about these starry ideals. What it's about, they'd say, is strictly economics. Where for the colonists, the issue might have been taxation without representation—and consequently higher taxes—at Gore the issue is likewise economic: How do we make more money and forget the ideals? And for another faction, the issue is to make the other two factions see that they're not adversaries—that ideals and practical economics are compatible with one another.

Gore is like colonial America also in that these debates are heated, and go on in public and private places. And also, I suspect, like in colonial America, at Gore, the debates are interspersed among a lot of hard work and attention to the practical necessities of getting the job done.

Coda on Culture:  
One More View

There is a well-known story at Gore about an associate, Jack Dougherty, that was the lead in the *Inc.* article about W. L. Gore & Associates. Jack, fresh from an MBA program at William and Mary, came to work his first day and excitedly reported to Bill Gore and said, "Well, Bill, here I am. What am I supposed to do?" and Bill Gore said, "Well, Jack, why don't you look around and find something you want to do." And so Jack wandered around for a while and finally found a home for himself as marketer for the fledgling Gore-Tex® fabrics business. Jack became a very influential associate, opened a Hong Kong office, and has since returned to the states to be part of the leadership team in the fabrics division.

For some associates, this is a good Gore story because it speaks of the freedom and opportunity at Gore and what they hope to enjoy. For other associates, this is not a good Gore story because it makes Gore sound like it's not a real business. "I mean really," a typical response might go. "Most people we hire have a specific set of commitments on day one. Associates do not go wandering around looking for things to do." For still other associates, the story is neither good nor bad. It just doesn't square with their own experience. One operator told me a joke, and it was clearly a joke and not a complaint. "When I was hired, I was told to wander around until I found something that I liked. And so I started wandering around when I heard this deep voice behind me saying, 'You're getting warmer, you're getting warmer,' and then I stopped in front of the seam tape machine and then the voice said, 'That's it, you've found it, seam tape machine, second shift.'" The operator roared with laughter, as did the others in the group we were in. He quickly added that he loved working at Gore, but that Gore didn't always live up to the stories that were told about it.

One of the problems with writing about organizational culture is the tension that comes from trying to tell *a* good story and, at the same time, giving voice to contrasting experience and points of view. How do I represent "reality"? What is Gore "really" like? Which is more typical—Jack Dougherty's experience or the seam tape operator's experience? One associate will say, based on personal experience, that Gore is an organization that provides extraordinary freedom and opportunity. Another will say that operating a machine is operating a machine and no matter what company you work for you got to be there a certain time of day and work until another time of day. Another associate will chime in that at Gore, you're lucky because you probably won't have anybody breathing down your neck screaming at you to make quota or treating you in another hundred more subtle but no less demeaning ways. Moreover, the problem of representing a culture to others is no different than the problem of representing it to oneself. For a given associate, on one day, Gore *is indeed* a place of exceptional opportunity. For the same associate, on another day, the work is just as routine there as

anywhere. Thus the problem: What is the main pattern, and what are the untangling threads? What I have presented as the story of the Gore culture has been admittedly influenced by my own experience in being a participant observer. I had the freedom to wander around, and the good fortune, consequently, to be involved in getting things done. And so, based on my own experience, I draw conclusions about what the main pattern is and what the untangling threads might be. I believe that the picture of the Gore culture that I have given is reasonably recognizable to most associates—that in fact I have drawn the main pattern. By and large, associates who have read drafts of this article agree with my presentation.

But what are the untangling threads? For whom doesn't the Gore culture work? Where does experience not fit? There is a general belief at Gore that individuals who need a lot of structure and guidance will not survive long. There is also a general recognition that associates who are "insecure" do not make very good sponsors, because they may be "threatened" by the accomplishments and potential of the associates they sponsor and thus may inhibit or obstruct their growth. My own observation is that Gore sometimes finds itself with a serious technical problem, and someone is hired from the outside to "fix it" fast. These people often employ rather autocratic means in attacking the problem, which are tolerated as long as everyone perceives a "crisis." Once the crisis is past, a "personnel" problem then sometimes develops. The new hire, having been recognized and rewarded for taking care of the technical problem, believes that the "Gore culture" is just fantasy, and continues in his or her autocratic ways. However, when the crisis has passed, other associates object to the autocratic ways, resist, and insist on the supremacy of the Gore ways of doing things. The effectiveness of the new hire is jeopardized, and confusion and bad feelings may result. In some cases, the new hire eventually leaves, and Gore loses his or her technical competence. In some cases, the new hire stays on, acts autocratically, and remains a source of friction. In most cases, the new hire "evolves" into an associate who comes to accommodate or even appreciate the Gore way of doing things.

Thus sometimes it's difficult to tell if what we're looking at is a loose thread or something that will be drawn back into the overall pattern. Consider, for example, the leader who acts like a boss, fails to keep commitments to the team, and loses credibility. He seems like a living counterexample to everything that the Gore culture stands for. But what is the solution? To have Bob Gore step in autocratically and fire him? Consider what has actually happened on a number of occasions—the team stops following the leader, the team relieves the leader of his or her commitments. Isn't this now an example of how the culture does work, rather than a counterexample?

In fact, at Gore there is among senior associates an abiding faith in what they call the "self-cleansing process of the lattice," by which they mean that, over time, culturally aberrant practices will be dealt with. There is some suspicion among some newer associates, however, that the self-cleansing process of the lattice may be rather slow or rather selective. A few sponsors

eem to act like "bosses," a few associates seem to act more like "subordinates." The affected associate wants to know: Who will take care of the problem? Who will enforce the culture? My own answer, as tentative and unsatisfying as it may be, goes something like this: The Gore culture is not utopia, and its object is not to set up a perfect organization. Instead, it recognizes that there will inevitably be problems, mistakes, oversights, and conflicts. What the Gore culture does is increase the possibility that those who see problems, mistakes, oversights, and conflicts can do something about them. The issue is less Who will take care of the problem? and more What energy, skill, influence, and wisdom do *you* have to contribute to the solution? Sometimes we act, sometimes we must be patient, and sometimes—no doubt unfortunately—we must accept the reality that we live in an imperfect world and we lack the energy, skill, influence, and wisdom to solve some of the problems that confront us.

And so here is the picture of the Gore culture: the Gore charter—with its freedom, fairness, commitment, waterline, lattice, sponsor, leader; the images of Gore—as clusters of peasant villages, as a large improvisational jazz group, as factions in colonial America; the Gore experience—predominantly positive, yet variable, problematic, imperfect, pragmatic. Taken together, they give, I hope, some sense of the texture and feel of the place. But these still represent for me contexts, pictures of the background. The most striking memory about Gore that I have kept with me is a conversation that I overheard in one of the Gore lunchrooms between two associates—one the plant receptionist and the other the plant maintenance and security associate. Both were talking about why they liked working at Gore, and I doubt that they knew or cared that I was listening in. "I am thankful," said the one, "to be working in a place where I'm doing maintenance and security and anything else I want to tackle. It's not boring, but you know, it's more than that, it's that I feel I can honestly make a difference."

And the other replied, "And that's the way it is for me, too. And I'll keep working here as long as it stays fun and I feel I can make a difference."

That conversation was important to me because it alerted me to listen for particular things in conversations among associates. And after nine months of sabbatical, and the equivalent of another several months of consulting, I do not recall one case of an associate saying, "That's not my job," or "Don't ask me, I just work here." But I can think of case after case of associates saying the equivalent of "I think I can make a difference." To me, that is the most consequential feature of the Gore culture: that so many associates do not cower or dissemble or retreat or space out before some organizational monolith, but instead feel that they stand before their organization as an equal, as a partner, as an entity as capable of affecting their organization as of being affected by it. When I began my sabbatical, I was unprepared for such a vision of organizational life. Although my intellectual conception of organizational culture was evenhanded, and I talked about cultures being like webs that both enabled and constrained organizational members, my unsaid

presumption was that in the real world, organizations did a lot more constraining than enabling. Certainly my own previous experience with organizations bore this out. I never felt more like a cog in the machinery than when I worked for a large aerospace company. And even in the university setting, where I felt a great deal of autonomy, I seldom felt that I could have an impact on the institutions in which I practiced my trade. And certainly as I read the literature, scholarly and popular, the constraints of organizational life became more and more apparent. So you can imagine my own surprise when I heard myself saying to a colleague, "Most organizations make you aware of the limitations placed on people by the organization, but at Gore, honest, I felt that what limitations there were were the limitations *of* people placed on people. By and large, the organization makes it possible for people to do their most." So, however interesting it might be to talk about the Gore charter, however clever it might be to say that Gore is the peasant village organization, or the improvisational jazz group organization, or the colonial America organization, however diffidently objective I might feel in pointing out flaws in the Gore way of doing things, what sticks with me the most and seems most consequential is the view of Gore as the empowering organization. And the question I have wrestled with of late is a simple one: Can I deduce the rules implicit or explicit in the Gore culture that make Gore an empowering organization? I now turn to my attempt to begin an answer to that question.

### OPERATING RULES OF THE EMPOWERING ORGANIZATION

I believe that Gore sustains an enabling or empowering culture by sometimes explicitly, sometimes intuitively, following six rules. I see these rules as a set, with no one of them "first" and none "dispensable." Moreover, I believe that, implemented as a set, they would be the basis for creating empowering organizational cultures elsewhere. They are as follows:

(1) *Distribute power and opportunity widely.* As a number of scholars have pointed out, "power" has two decidedly different connotations. Some have distinguished between "power over" and "power to" or between "power to dominate" and "power to accomplish" (Kanter, 1977). Ironically, organizational theorizing about authority began with the presumption that accomplishment was the outcome of domination—that you needed a power structure and clear chain of command in order to get things done. But revisionist thinking about contemporary American organizations shows that the two have become uncoupled, and that there is a preoccupation with domination and climbing the hierarchical ladder and a lack of attention to getting the job done. In fact, popular books such as *Power: How to Get It, How to Use It* (Korda, 1975) and *Games Mother Never Taught You* (Harragan, 1977) make it seem that the only issue alive in organizations is in getting power over others. No one seems to do any work anymore!

Although it is no doubt an exaggeration to conclude that the power to dominate and the power to accomplish are always unrelated, it is clear that at Gore the emphasis is on power to accomplish and that the power to dominate is minimized in many different ways. In part, the lack of an organizational chart helps keep people's eyes off of ladder climbing and status seeking. If there is no higher title to aspire to than "associate," there is little reason to expend energy in back-office politicking and impression management. Indeed, one of the most widely known stories in Gore and outside of Gore has to do with the lack of titles. A Flagstaff associate, Sarah Clifton, was a member of a women's professional club. As the other women had business cards to distribute indicating their lofty positions, and all she had was a card that said "Associate," she felt a certain discomfort. Her sponsor at the time, Peter Cooper, told her that she should just make up a lofty title for herself, that associates needed to be "associates" on the inside, but that they could take whatever title they wanted in dealing with people on the outside. So, as a joke, Peter had some business cards made up for Sarah that identified her as "Sarah Clifton, W. L. Gore & Associates, Supreme Commander."

While minimizing the focus on power to dominate, Gore supports the wide distribution of the power to accomplish. Because associates are bound by commitments rather than job descriptions, associates are more inclined to do what is necessary to get the job done (and take care of their commitments) rather than to be constrained by the definition of what it is their job description says they're supposed to do. In addition, associates have relatively free access to money (and the access becomes freer as the associate gets more "credibility") necessary to get the job done. Finally, the lattice gives the associates relatively free access to the information and knowledge of other associates that may be relevant to getting the job done.

The power to accomplish at Gore is intimately connected with the opportunities for accomplishment because it is the nature and magnitude of the opportunity that in large measure determines the resource power that an associate can bring to bear on a problem. Distributing opportunity widely means decentralizing the process by which important problems get attached to people. Rather than presume that problems ought to be attached to positions (which is what the organizational chart with its job descriptions would encourage), at Gore the presumption is that problems ought to be "owned" by those people interested enough, capable enough, and committed enough to do something about them. One consequence of widely distributing opportunities to work out problems is that, as associates successfully solve problems, they become visible as potential problem solvers for future problems, and they become models for other associates who now believe that indeed they too are capable of taking on problem-solving opportunities. Thus, by distributing opportunities widely (and giving people access to the resources to solve those problems), Gore makes it possible for associates to pursue accomplishment cooperatively, which increases the resources to take on additional problems.

(2) *Maintain a full, open, and decentralized communication system.* Such a communication system allows members to be informed about problems, opportunities, and resources so that they can make mature decisions about what to work on. Because such a communication system is decentralized, there is less danger of a monolithic "definition of organizational reality" that inhibits the organization from registering and responding to changes in the environment. Also, because such a communication system is decentralized, there is less of a tendency to have a "party line" mentality that members must adhere to, and more of a tendency for members to be actively involved in arguing for their perspectives, plans, and actions.

Additionally, if there is less need to "launder" information as it moves up the hierarchy, there is more opportunity for the organization systemically to maintain a more complex and equivocal view of its environment and of itself. Such a system presumes that people can indeed learn from dealing with equivocality, rather than being overwhelmed by it. Finally, such a system, coupled with a decentralized power structure, will likely mean that there will be more problem-solving information moving through the organization, and less energy spent on impression management and face management communication. Such a system presumes that people can learn from mistakes, for example, and mistakes do not need to be elaborately covered up or whitewashed.

At Gore, the lattice provides the communication system with remarkable openness and decentralization. The company newsletters reflect these qualities. They are staffed by associates who have other commitments, but who believe in the idea of company newsletters. Many of the articles are submissions by associates who are not in any way on the "staff" of the newsletter. The review process is not lengthy; the key issue in the review is not whether leadership is portrayed favorably, but whether there is anything legally questionable in any of the articles. As a result, the newsletters do not read like company propaganda. Although there are always some good news articles that tell of Gore successes and opportunities, that is not all that the newsletters print. The front page story in one recent newsletter was about an R&D project that, after several years of trying to develop a new medical product and on the verge of human testing, closed itself down because the quality of the product just wasn't as good as the team had wanted. In another newsletter, a group of associates concerned about AIDS drafted a statement, after meeting with state health officials, expressing their sentiments about how they felt Gore should deal with the situation should it arise among associates. The statement was an invitation for other associates to express their points of view or provide input so that all associates could make their opinions known in a dispassionate moment.

(3) *Use integrative problem solving.* Traditional management theory tends to encourage the use of localized or segmentalized problem solving (Kanter, 1983). Problem-solving responsibilities are assigned to the smallest functional unit. The presumption is that however much equivocality there is in a problem

that confronts an organization, as each functional unit deals with its piece of the problem, the equivocality will be proportionately reduced until all of the equivocality has been absorbed and the problem has been solved (Weick, 1979). However, reality often does not bear out traditional wisdom. At the very least, as Kanter has pointed out, localized or segmentalized problem solving encourages a past orientation to solving problems: Functional units confronting problems tend to ask, "What did we do last time this sort of thing came up?" Worse, functional units often engage in substantial expenditures of energy arguing over who has the problem, or who has caused the problem, with impression management rather than problem solving the typical response. And in some cases, as one subunit "solves" the problem from its point of view, its "solution" increases rather than decreases the equivocality that subsequent subunits have to deal with.

Integrative problem solving, which assigns problem-solving responsibilities among functional work units, is the classic task force approach to problem solving. To the extent that power and opportunity are genuinely distributed to task forces and to the extent that the task force has full and open access to information, then the task force approach permits the problem to be cast, not at local subunit definitions, but at a higher level of abstraction with greater initial equivocality. As Kanter points out, with integrative problem solving the past is less likely to be called upon as the source of solutions, and the unique configuration of people who make up the task force are freer to come up with an innovative solution. Because this innovative solution is addressed to a problem defined more equivocally and broadly by the task force than it would have been by a single functional unit, implementation throughout the organization is usually quicker and more effective. Finally, task forces make more people visible as problem solvers and encourage a "we" attitude among functional units rather than a "we/ they" attitude between units.

Gore makes abundant use of task forces. The "waterline" principle, which encourages consultative decision making, encourages associates to think about involving others in defining and solving problems. The lack of an organizational chart keeps associates from too quickly deciding that the problem is "all mine" or "all theirs." And the presence of the lattice makes it very easy to invite a wide spectrum of associates in on tackling a perceived problem. Gore successfully uses task forces in dealing with a wide array of problems from manufacturing processes within a plant to benefits policy across the corporation.

(4) *Practice challenge in an environment of trust.* The premise here parallels the argument for the use of task forces: An individual will have the best chance of accomplishing something if problem definition and solution generation have been honed by competing perspectives. But challenge, to be most effective, must be offered in the spirit of help rather than in the spirit of one-upmanship. Thus a chain of presumptions is involved. Individuals with ideas or proposals will be more willing to expose the real strengths and weaknesses of their position, rather than overselling their position, because

they want real feedback and not just approval. Individuals challenging the position will do so, not to look good or smart or to score points, but to help expose hidden weaknesses and strengths. Action is taken and, whether it proves successful or not, all parties involved refrain from "I told you so's" and instead look to see what has been learned from the action and its consequence.

I came to see the strength of this rule at Gore from a discussion I had with two very successful sales leaders. They were describing for me how they conducted their business. What they kept going back to was the fact that in meetings, the most frequently used word was "bullshit." Regardless of who put the idea forward, or who was responding to it, there was no need to "salute" ideas. Yet at the same time, despite all the challenges, the presumption was that each person would not be paralyzed into inaction, but would do what seemed best to him or her as a result of the meeting and then would act.

(5) *Reward and recognize people so as to encourage a high-performance ethic and self-responsibility.* Reward here does not simply mean compensate people, and recognize does not simply mean institute "employee of the month" programs. Rather, include the idea that distributing power and opportunity is for many people reward and recognition. Thus reward and recognition (or power and opportunity) must be given to those who successfully attack problems and implement solutions that help get the job done. Problem-solving practices are best sustained by encouraging people to be responsible for themselves rather than constantly monitoring them. People should be expected, and should be held accountable by their peers, to do their best to understand what needs to be done, what they can uniquely and realistically contribute to getting it done, and what gives the greatest value for their effort.

At Gore, the greatest asset an associate has is his or her credibility, and the worst that can happen is for an associate to lose credibility. To lose credibility means that an associate is identified as being someone who won't perform, doesn't do what he or she promises, or who doesn't keep commitments. Such an individual is quickly identified as being a detriment to the team, and finds it increasingly difficult to find other associates who want to work with him or her. It isn't so much that the person is chastised or reprimanded, but rather, the flow of work moves around the person. He or she is left with no commitments to anyone—a sure sign that the person needs to find new commitments or to rethink his or her suitability to an organization like Gore.

(6) *Become wise by living through, and learning from, organizational ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction, and paradox.* In organizations that follow rules 1 through 5, equivocality will be high and experience will have shown that the world is complex and many sided. In such organizations, technique and policy must give way to situated judgment. Individuals come to realize that they can never fully resolve the ambiguities and inconsistencies, but they can act and learn from their actions.

At Gore, the ambiguities and inconsistencies become dimensions to think about. For example, Gore believes in individual effort and in teamwork.

Which is more significant? Similarly, at Gore, the person with the greatest organizational perspective is paid attention to; so is the person closest to the problem. Who should be paid the most attention? At Gore, the presumption is that the best person to do a job is the person who can make good decisions or the person who is best at making decisions come to good ends. Who's the best person for a job? These inconsistencies cannot be resolved in the abstract, but only in specific situations. Gore's willingness to accept this state of affairs predisposes it to making people and not policy the mainstay of problem solving. Gore acts as though the old saw, "People are our most important resource," is true. And here, I believe, the innovation of the Gore style of organization has implications beyond its own success. It has implications for the future development of the American character.

### ORGANIZATIONS, WORK, AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN CHARACTER

When the Puritans stepped ashore in the new world, they brought with them a vision of work that tied each member of the community to all others by an injunction to be useful and that tied each member to God by a link between one's secular and general callings. The work ethic was more than a call to be diligent and frugal; it stamped work as a moral activity (Rodgers, 1974). But the work ethic of our Puritan forebears was conditioned by a socioeconomic system in which most people worked by themselves and for themselves, with seeable consequences for their communities. The industrialization of America has not lessened our rhetoric about the work ethic, but certainly has undermined the socioeconomic conditions that gave it rise. Modern corporate Americans have more concern for leisure than diligence, more concern for credit rating than frugality, and seem more coglike than useful. All of this would be an oppressive loss for us to bear, perhaps, were it not for the fact that we have also by and large lost our preoccupation with the morality of our work. Yuppies may claim that they have reenshrined American individualism and ambition, but the work ethic had moral and spiritual underpinnings that today's fast track is without.

Earl Shorris (1981) has written a black portrayal of modern corporate life that shows the consequences to people of the way we now organize ourselves. According to Shorris, we are impotent within the organizations we inhabit; the consequence of our impotence is an inability to relate to others, which subsequently individualizes us only by isolating us. Thus, feeling our aloneness rather than our individuality, we conform to the appearances of the mass of like beings. Our loyalties are not to one another, but to our organizations. And why are we impotent? Because in organizations, we are infantilized. We have little power, we are too fully aware of our replaceability and expendability; we are carefully fed information and misinformation; important things are kept secret; we get bread and circuses; our decisions count for little; rule is by nobody.

Shorris offers no clear-cut way to change this, but he offers a vision of what would need to be different. We would need to see ourselves truly as ends capable of beginnings rather than as means. We would need to be potent, capable of actions for which we can see the consequences. Only then can we be autonomous individuals rather than atomized individuals. Only then can we relate to collective others rather than conform to the appearances of the mass.

It seems to me that what Shorris has so dramatically portrayed is a vision of life in the disempowering organization. What Shorris has hinted at, and what we can try to envision with more specificity, is life in the empowering organization. In the disempowering organization, formalized rules and centralized planning are the mechanisms for achieving coordination and control. The initiation of action happens "out there," somewhere away from the individual, who experiences himself or herself as a cog in some larger wheel.

In the empowering organization, more emphasis would be put on creating a work environment where individuals could act responsibly. The initiation of action would happen "in here," as a consequence of human choice because the individual would have the power to make choices. For that action to be responsible, the individual would need to have information about what the consequences of that action was to the individual and to coworkers and to the organization.

The disempowering organization tends to encourage office politics, a careerist or cynic mentality, and obscene individualism clothed within an "other-oriented" personality. Incapable of directly initiating action, the individual gives up hope or tries to ferret out the clues behind the mysterious and incomplete information all around and thereby provide a way by which the flow of action can be foretold or perhaps even influenced. The cynic sees no possibility in relating to others; the careerist sees possibility in using others. Where one makes no waves and the other stands out, they both look out for themselves by carefully measuring the cues of others. The empowering organization would tend to encourage concern for accomplishment rather than for status. Power would be used to get the job done, rather than to stand over others. Being capable of initiating action, the individual could look at others as ends themselves—capable of initiating action and therefore as worthy collaborators. The disempowering organization considers work an amoral activity—a job's a job, somebody's got to do it, you're only following orders, you've got two kids to feed. The empowering organization would consider work a moral activity.

I do not know any truly disempowering organizations, nor do I want to claim that Gore is a completely empowering organization. But there is a telling exercise I have done in nearly every class I have taught since my sabbatical. "Write down what you consider to be the characteristics of a mature person," I say to the students. I then ask them what they've written and write their answers on the board. Usually the list looks something like this: responsible, cares about others, not afraid to admit mistakes, trusts others, confronts

problems, knows own strengths and weaknesses, accepts the consequences of his or her own behavior. And then I write down a list of opposites: isn't responsible, doesn't care about others, hides mistakes, distrusts others, avoids problems, doesn't know own strengths and weaknesses, blames others for consequences of his or her behavior. And then I say, "This second list, this is the way too many people are in too many organizations today. And this first list, this is more like the way it is with people at Gore."

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